

Daily Reflections on the Advent 2023 Mass Readings

The Lord is Near



INTRODUCTION

Advent is a season of anticipation. It invites us to focus our full attention on God's coming once again into our hearts and lives as God did over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. During this Advent let us be willing to set aside some time each day to search for God—or even better become aware that God has found us—and let this change our lives. Thus all of our Advent activities—finding daily silent times for listening to God's Word in Scripture, reflecting and praying about the Good News of Jesus' surprising presence with us, anticipating and then rejoicing when we discover his presence anew in us and in those around us—offer many new possibilities for a deeper relationship with God that will transform us and our lives now and during the coming year. And if this Advent booklet of daily reflections helps you discover anew how present God is now in yourself and in your life, we invite you to consider similar reflections and prayers for each day of the year found in the quarterly booklets of *Words of Grace* available from *AllSaintsPress.com*.

—Steve Mueller, *Editor*

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Come to Us Lord Jesus!

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 / 1 Cor 1:3-9 / Mk 13:33-37

For the Church the word *Advent* has two meanings: presence and anticipation. Presence: the light is present, Christ is the new Adam, with us and among us. His light is already shining and we must open the eyes of our hearts to see the light and be grateful that God himself entered history as a new source of good. But Advent also means anticipation. The dark night of evil is still strong. And therefore in Advent we pray insistently: come Jesus; come, give power to light and to good; come where falsehood, ignorance of God, violence and injustice predominate. Come Lord Jesus, give power to the good in the world and help us be bearers of your light, peacemakers, witnesses of the truth. Come, Lord Jesus!

—Pope Benedict XVI

How might I make presence and anticipation more prominent in my Advent?

Advent (Latin, “coming”) is the 4 week liturgical season of preparation for the coming of Jesus by remembering his birth in Bethlehem (past), by anticipating his coming in glory (future) and by celebrating his coming to us in word and sacrament (present).

Swords into Plowshares

Is 2:1-5 / Mt 8:5-11

The nonviolent life to which we are called is rooted in the life of God and in God's longing for humanity. Jesus made visible the nonviolence of God, who created the universe not out of violence but out of love. Jesus lived and proclaimed the nonviolent life that God calls us to live: to make peace with one another; to resist the violence and injustice that threaten or destroy this peace; and to foster a world where the fullness of peace is the birthright of all. Jesus showed us how to live this way of faithful nonviolence, even in the midst of violence and oppression, by calling us to love our enemies, to not kill, to put down the sword, and to respond actively to the cry of the poor.

—Pax Christi International
Catholic Nonviolence Initiative

*How might I respond more actively
in this Advent season to the needs of the poor?*

This week's first readings are from the collection of oracles of the **Isaiah** who prophesied about 740–700 BC to give hope to the tiny kingdom of Judah during and after its larger sister kingdom of Israel had been conquered and swallowed up by the emerging Assyrian empire (721 BC).

Two-Way Prayer

Is 11:1-10 / Lk 10:21-24

Prayer is a two-way process: speaking and listening. God speaks to us: we listen. We speak to God: God listens. God speaks in the silence of our heart, and we listen. Then we speak to God from the fullness of our heart, and God listens. Our words are useless unless they come from our hearts. Listen in silence, because if your heart is full of other things you cannot hear God's voice. But when you have listened to God's voice in the stillness of your heart, then your heart is filled with God. Then you can hear God everywhere: in the closing of a door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing, in the flowers, the animals—that silence which is wonder and praise.

—St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta
Everything Starts from Prayer

*Where have I most detected God's
voice calling to me lately?*

Biblical **justice** means rightly-ordered relationships and their obligations—proper interpersonal behavior toward both God and others. Humans must strive (though faithful obedience to law) to make the world as just as possible, but true justice comes only from God's action (God's justice).

Living Toward Eternity

Is 25:6-10a / Mt 15:29-37

Our universe is a wounded universe, divided, suffering, with great despair and poverty, where there are many signs of death, division and hatred. But all of these signs of death are taken up in the cross of Jesus and transfigured in the Resurrection. Our hope is that the winter of humanity will gradually be transformed to the bursting forth of love, for it is to this that we are called. We will pass through the winter of suffering to the kingdom of God and rebirth. We can begin to sense them already, as the peace of the Spirit comes into our hearts, quelling bitterness and recreating hope. We sense the light which is a tiny sign of what we are called to live in the glory of the wedding feast of eternity.

—Jean Vanier
Be Not Afraid

*What most acts now as a helpful light
to lead me out of my darkness?*

“Hold dominion over my heart, O Lord Jesus. Keep it as your inheritance. Make your dwelling in me, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For you are my God and I will praise you, together with the Eternal Father and your quickening Spirit, now, henceforth and forever.”

—St. John Damascene

The LORD My Rock

Is 26:1-6 / Mt 7:21, 24-27

There are times in our lives for action, when it is simply not enough to cry out, “Lord, Lord!” To do nothing is like building a house on sandy ground. Once the rainy season sets in, the water will lash at the foundation and the house will collapse. Only when each of our actions is directed by a conscious turning to the Lord for guidance, only when a sense of the Lord’s presence accompanies us in all that we do, only then will there be an integral wholeness about life. No single action will be out of harmony with the others nor disrupt the peace of our lives. Whether we are silent or speak, remain motionless or act, we must rest upon the rock of the Lord.

—Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP
Biblical Meditations for Advent

*What has most helped me turn
toward God so far this Advent?*

Special **Advent devotions** to deepen the meaning of this season include the lighting of the Advent wreath, the Advent calendar which helps remind us of the season with daily thoughts and activities and Advent prayers that prepare us spiritually for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Hail, Favored One!

Gn 3:9-15, 20 / Eph 1:3-6, 11-12 / Lk 1:26-38

Though today's feast celebrates Mary's freedom from sin from the moment of her conception, the gospel tells the story of the Annunciation. Mary was a young girl, probably not more than fourteen or fifteen, when Gabriel came to her with his announcement. It's not surprising that she was troubled. She was called to make a decision, to take a risk. She was already betrothed. If she became pregnant before the wedding and Joseph wasn't the father of her child, she could be stoned to death. To say "yes" was to invite scandal and maybe even death. Her "yes" changed her life forever. By it she became the mother of God. In Mary the Word became flesh. She brought Christ into the world.

—Angeline Hubert

*How am I being called to deepen my relationship
with God and bring Christ into my world?*

"Mother Mary, help our faith! Open our ears to hear God's word and recognize his voice and call. Awaken in us a desire to follow in his footsteps, to go forth from our own land and to receive his promise. Help us to be touched by his love, that we may touch him in faith."

—Pope Francis

Go and Heal

Is 30:19-21, 23-26 / Mt 9:35-10:1, 5a, 6-8 8

Several times, Jesus tells his students to emulate him and go out healing. It is the characteristic activity of the kingdom. That could mean that anyone wishing to adopt the Jesus spirituality would find ways to heal whenever physical, spiritual, or emotional sickness comes along. The student of Jesus never forgets the charge to care for souls, to be a healer in every sense of the word. But to be a healer is not exactly the same as healing people who are sick. It is less a matter of doing and more of being. To be a healer you have to be transformed as a person, transfigured by your new and different outlook on humanity and the world.

—Thomas Moore
Writing in the Sand

*How might I help to heal the various types
of sickness in those I encounter today?*

“We do not preach only one coming of Christ, but a second as well. At the first he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. At his second he will be clothed in light as in a garment. So we look beyond the first and await the second.”

—St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Ready for Comfort and Glory

Is 40:1-5, 9-11 / 2 Pt 3:8-14 / Mk 1:1-8

God speaks today like a mother grieving over confused, wandering children. She sends them her message through those who can reach them: “Give them comfort, tell them I love them. Assure them, I will not weary as I wait for them to come home.” The mother image is particularly apt for today’s selection from 2 Peter which depicts God’s patient, even fretful, vigil over a people who choose dangerous paths. Then Mark portrays the beginning of the Gospel through the Baptist who calls this wandering wilderness people to prepare for something new. Repentance is only the beginning. Covid taught us that mountains & valleys, boundaries & divisions can only pretend to separate us from God and one another. The Spirit longs to lead us into God’s own glory. Are we prepared?

—Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

*What is the Spirit of God most offering
and/or asking of me today?*

John the Baptist’s **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins** identifies the two stages preparing for God’s inevitably coming judgment of Israel. Repentance means turning from sin back to God and forgiveness of sins indicates God’s mercy at judgment time—what everyone wants instead of condemnation.

Between Promise & Fulfillment

Is 35:1-10 / Lk 5:17-26

We must turn to God and let ourselves be led on our faith journey. We must let God take us from captivity to freedom, from Egypt to Canaan, not fully knowing how to cross the huge desert between the two. People of faith expect the promises of their deepest soul to be fulfilled. Life for them becomes a time between promise and fulfillment. It is never a straight line, but always three steps forward and two backward—and the backward creates much of the knowledge and impetus for the forward. Like the Israelites, we will find that the desert is not all desert. The way to the Promised Land leads to life even in the midst of the desert. When we least expect it, there is an oasis. As the Scriptures promise, God will make the desert bloom (Is 35:1).

—Richard Rohr

The Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament

How has God helped make my desert times bloom this year?

In the Bible, the **desert** includes not only the vast sandy stretches that we call deserts but more often indicates what we call “wilderness,” whether the semiarid areas with a seasonal grassy covering (steppe) favored by nomads or the inhospitable and uninhabited arid and rocky wastelands.

Conversion from Below

Zec 2:14-17 or Rv 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab / Lk 1:26-38 or Lk 1:39-47

The Indian Juan Diego and the mestiza Virgin, together occupying two lowly rungs of the New World's social hierarchy become the catalysts for conversion, thereby introducing a new model of evangelization. Rather than the European pattern of conversion, moving from the top down in society, there is an obvious reversal. In Mexico, the conversion of the people to the Catholic faith came not through the good graces of a prince but through the obedient actions of a simple Indian who followed the request of our Lady, herself a *mestiza* woman. Instead of a conversion of a nation's people, it is a conversion of persons who together forged their *mestiza* nation.

—Carl A. Anderson & Msgr. Eduardo Chávez
Our Lady of Guadalupe

*How has this Advent helped me draw
closer to God through Mary?*

“Let not your heart be disturbed. Am I not here, who is your Mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within my fold? What else do you wish? Do not grieve nor be disturbed by anything.”

—The Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego

Opening Our Hearts to Jesus

Is 40:25-31 / Mt 11:28-30

In our prayer we are turning with our whole consciousness toward the mystery of Jesus' indwelling spirit. But it will not impose itself on us by force—because it Love. It will not break through the doors of our hearts. We must open our heart to it. The wonderful beauty of prayer is that the opening of the heart is as natural as the opening of a flower. Just as a flower opens and blooms when we let it be, so if we simply are, if we become and remain silent, then our hearts cannot but open: the Spirit cannot but pour through into our whole being. It is this we have been created for. It is what the Spirit has been given to us to bring about.

—John Main, OSB
Essential Writings

When have I most allowed the Holy Spirit to guide and change me? With what results?

Many Bible translations now use **LORD** in small capital letters to indicate God's sacred personal name—Yahweh. This choice is particularly apt for two reasons. First, **LORD** has 4 letters as does God's sacred name in Hebrew. Moreover, since God's name was so sacred, the Jews did not speak it aloud but would instead often say *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for Lord.

Our Pilgrim Journey

Is 41:13-20 / Mt 11:11-15

We are pilgrims on a spiritual journey in which God travels with us, indeed, pilgrims on the way home to God. Our hearts are restless because they are pilgrim hearts whose home is not here. It is joy, not sorrow, that Christian pilgrims carry in their hearts, because they know that they are on their way to their home in this God who is love. The spiritual life is a journey about change. As you pray you will undoubtedly experience opportunities for growth. The heart of the pilgrim journey is about putting God first and trusting in this abiding presence and providence. None of us know when or how opening the door of our heart might make a difference to those nearby or to those in the larger global story of transformation.

—Joyce Rupp
The Cup of Our Life

*What would most help me to put God first
and open my heart wider to God?*

The **kingdom of heaven** is Matthew's characteristic description of the kingdom of God. Since out of reverence Jews often substituted another word instead of saying God's name, this might be one more indication that Matthew had a previous Jewish background.

The Struggle for Holiness

Is 48:17-19 / Mt 11:16-19

One cannot live the Christian life as it is meant to be lived without seeking to be holy. But holiness is not easy, and is not just a matter of will power and good intentions. In this difficult struggle we gain experience of our limitations and weaknesses. But we also learn, by experience, that if we trust in the power of God, and seek to imitate Jesus Christ in his passion and his victory, we receive mysterious strength that has no human source. Then we begin to become more closely identified with Christ and to realize, at least in the silence of the heart that loves and trusts him, that Jesus himself lives in us and is our strength. Jesus Christ is our new and hidden self.

—Thomas Merton
Honorable Reader

How have I most experienced Jesus' presence dwelling within me and in those around me?

Isaiah's description of God as the **Holy One of Israel** summarizes God's most important characteristics. Holiness identifies God as transcendent—totally other and different from all created things. But Yahweh is also Israel's one and only God by the covenant established with them from among all the nations.

Jesus Wants You!

Sir 48:1-4, 9-11 / Mt 17:9a, 10-13

Jesus no longer belongs to the past, but lives in the present and is projected towards the future. God's newness appears to us as victory over sin, evil and death, over everything that crushes life and makes it seem less human. Let the risen Jesus enter your life, welcome him as a friend, with trust: he is life! If up till now you have kept him at a distance, step forward. He will receive you with open arms. If you have been indifferent, take a risk. You won't be disappointed. If following him seems difficult, don't be afraid, trust him, be confident that he is close to you. He is with you and will give you the peace you are looking for and the strength to live as he would have you do.

—Pope Francis

*How have I been drawing closer to Jesus
as I prepare for Christmas?*

The "**O Antiphons**," (because all begin with the interjection "O") refer to the 7 special antiphons or invitations to prayer recited before the *Magnificat* during evening Vespers of the Liturgy of the Hours during the Octave before Christmas, December 17-24. These Antiphons have been part of the liturgy since the 8th century.

Rejoice Always!

Is 61:1-2a, 10-11 / 1 Thes 5:16-24 / Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

Joy is possible even amid great labors—the labor of dying, the labor of birthing, and the labors between. We cannot force it. But when we create moments to breathe between labor pains, and surrender our senses to the present moment, notice the colors and light and feeling of being alive, here, together, joy comes more easily. It is a felt sense in our bodies. In the face of horrors visited upon our world daily, in the struggle to protect our loved ones, choosing to let in joy is a revolutionary act. Joy returns us to everything good and beautiful and worth fighting for. It gives us energy for the long labor. Joy is the gift of love: it makes the labor an end in itself. I believe laboring in joy is the meaning of life.

—Valarie Kaur
See No Stranger

*What brings me much joy, and
how might I express that joy today?*

The Third Sunday of Advent is called **Gaudete Sunday** (Latin, rejoice), so named from the Latin opening words of the Entrance Antiphon of the Mass “*Gaudete in Domino semper*” (“Rejoice in the Lord always,” Philippians 4:4). On this Sunday the celebrant normally wears rose vestments at Mass.

God with Us

Jer 23:5-8 / Mt 1:18-25

We do not dare to believe or trust the incredible truth that God could live in us, and live there out of choice, out of preference. Whether you understand or not, God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons. If you dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, then you will truly understand what is beyond words and explanations because it is too close to be explained: the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and God are in all truth One Spirit.

—Thomas Merton
The Monastic Journey

*What has most helped me become more aware
of God's life within me this year?*

"St. Joseph was great in faith, not because he uttered any words of his own but above all because he heard the words of God. He listened in silence. The words of God fell deeply into the soul of that upright man."

—Pope St. John Paul II

Our Spiritual Due Date

Jgs 13:2-7, 24-25a / Lk 1:5-25

Elizabeth and Mary both became physically pregnant, but not before they were fertile in the Spirit, as all disciples are called to be during Advent. As a woman's body swells to make space for new life, our beings must similarly expand to make room for Emmanuel, "God with(in) us." Spiritual barrenness occurs when our hearts are too confined by worries, doubts, self-seeking or unworthiness to leave room for Christ to gestate. Divine grace enables largesse of spirit, working miracles of birth amidst the sterility of our lives. Whether we are too old, too young, too tired, too sick or too busy, the Lord finds ways to be miraculously conceived within us, giving each of us a Christmas due date to be joyfully celebrated.

—Jerry Welte

*How can I better nurture the presence
of Christ to grow within me?*

Zechariah's priestly service occurs when his priestly group is chosen by lot to perform the daily Temple rituals—a morning and evening sacrifice of a lamb and an offering of flour mixed with oil, a libation of wine and an **incense offering**—which is what he performs.

Saying “Yes” to God

Is 7:10-14 / Lk 1:26-38

We all need to be told that God loves us, and the mystery of the Annunciation reveals an aspect of that love. But it also suggests that our response to this love is critical. Mary’s “How can this be?” is a simple yet profound response. Like any of the prophets, she asserts herself before God, saying, “Here am I.” Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God’s love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a “yes” that will change me forever?

—Kathleen Norris

Amazing Grace

How might I say “yes” to what God is asking of me?

Hyperdulia (Greek: heightened veneration) is the special veneration given to the Blessed Virgin Mary because of her unique role in the mystery of salvation, her exceptional gifts of grace from God and her pre-eminence among the saints. Hyperdulia is not adoration because only God is adored.

Blessing One Another

Sg 2:8-14 or Zep 3:14-18a / Lk 1:39-45

When I reflect upon the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth, I try to think about why Mary was allowed to go by her parents, who must have agonized about doing that. What were they dealing with when they learned that their precious daughter was pregnant before her marriage to Joseph? How many neighbors, or even relatives, might have been gossiping about Mary and, perhaps, even indicating that the law be executed that she be stoned to death? So, in order to protect her, they sent her to Jerusalem. Arriving there, she was greeted as “blessed among women” by Elizabeth, which reflected the very purpose for her visit and took away the negative feelings that Mary might have been experiencing. As it says in Zephaniah, the “Lord removed the judgment” against her.

—Dorothy Jonaitis

How might I share blessings when visiting others in the coming Christmas season?

Blessing identifies whatever contributes to earthly fulfillment, especially wealth and prosperity, family and children, health and long life. Elizabeth’s address to Mary as “blessed among women” recognizes God’s special election of her as the mother of the promised Messiah.

My Song Magnifies the LORD

1 Sm 1:24-28 / Lk 1:46-56

How well I remember the songs my mother taught me. There were songs from the radio where she worked as a writer, songs from the Second World War, and songs she made up while her children splashed in the bath. Today we hear Hannah's canticle of joy in the responsorial psalm, and a slightly redacted version of that on Mary's lips when she greets her cousin Elizabeth. It's fun to imagine that Mary learned Hannah's canticle from her own Jewish mother, whom the *Infancy Gospel of James* names Anna. It makes sense that Anna knew this song especially well because it was sung by the ancestress (Hannah) for whom she was named. But she could never have imagined that her daughter Mary would sing it as a way of introducing Jesus into the world!

—Kathy McGovern

What familiar songs draw me closer to God this Advent?

The **Magnificat** is the popular name for Mary's song in today's Gospel. Inspired by the Old Testament song of Hannah, Samuel's mother (1 Sam 2:1-10), it expresses her maternal joy and hope for a better world for her child because of God's concern for the poor and action for justice.

Advent Waiting

Mal 3:1-4, 23-24 / Lk 1:57-66

One of the other things I learned during pregnancy was that learning to savor the time of waiting allows us also to appreciate the event when it comes. The loss of an ability to wait often brings with it the inability to be fully and joyfully present now. Instead, we are constantly looking backward to better times we used to know and forward to better times that may be coming. The more we do this, the more we miss the present. Many people speak of the feeling of deep anticlimax on Christmas Day when that long-anticipated day does not live up to expectations. Often the reason for this is that we live forever in the future, so that, when the future becomes the present, we are ill equipped to deal with it and have lost the ability to be fully present, right now.

—Paula Gooder

The Meaning Is in the Waiting

*What might help me to concentrate more
on the present moment today?*

The **Incarnation** (Latin, *incarnare*, enfleshment) the coming into flesh or becoming fully human of God's Son, the second person of the divine Trinity, in Jesus of Nazareth. This is a fundamental mystery of the Christian faith, which although we can affirm it as true, we can never fully explain it.

God Meets Us Where We Are

2 Sm 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 / Rom 16:25-27 / Lk 1:26-38

God could have come to the world in any way that God desired. We may be so conditioned to the story of Jesus' birth in humble circumstances that we forget that this was a choice. God could have come to us as a powerful ruler, born into a family of wealth and privilege. But God wanted to meet us where we are. So God came, first of all, as a human being, as someone other men and women could approach. God is one of us and came in the least threatening of human states: a baby. God entered our world screaming and crying, dependent on someone to change him, feed him, nurse him, and care for his bodily needs. God came helplessly into the world to help us.

—James Martin, SJ
Jesus: A Pilgrimage

*What most amazes me about the way
Jesus chose to become human?*

The word **Christmas** comes from the Old English *Cristes Maesse*, the Mass of Christ, and is first found in 1038. In Latin it was called *Dies Natalis*, the Day of Birth, from which comes the French *Noël*. The first evidence of its celebration is attested in Egypt around AD 200.

Now Everything Changes

Vigil: Is 62:1-5 / Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 / Mt 1:1-25 or 1:18-25

Night: Is 9:1-6 / Ti 2:11-14 / Lk 2:1-14

Dawn: Is 62:11-12 / Ti 3:4-7 / Lk 2:15-20

Day: Is 52:7-10 / Heb 1:1-6 / Jn 1:1-18 or 1:1-5, 9-14

Today, the Son of God is born, and everything changes. The Savior of the world comes to partake of our human nature; no longer are we alone and forsaken. The Virgin offers us her Son as the beginning of a new life. The true light has come to illumine our lives so often beset by the darkness of sin. Today we once more discover who we are! We have been shown the way to reach the journey's end. Now we must put away all fear and dread, for the light shows us the path to Bethlehem. Like the shepherds of Bethlehem, may we too, with eyes full of amazement and wonder, gaze upon the child Jesus, God's Son. And in his presence may our hearts burst forth in prayer.

—Pope Francis

*How has everything changed for me
because of God's presence in my life?*

Jesus is at once both **human and divine**. A human like us, he is nevertheless our Lord, to whom we give honor and praise, glory and worship just as we do to God. He is also God's unique Son, and thus fully and completely what God is—divine.

Surrounded by Martyrs

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59 / Mt 10:17-22

As yet heaven and earth are not united. The star of Bethlehem is a star shining in a dark night, even today. On the day after Christmas the church already lays aside her white festive vestments and clothes herself in the color of blood, and on the fourth day in the purple of mourning. For the crib of the child is surrounded by martyrs. There is Stephen, the first martyr to follow his Lord to death; there are the innocent children, the babes of Bethlehem and Judah, who were cruelly slaughtered by the hands of brutal hangmen. What does this mean? The Son of the eternal Father descended from the glory of heaven, because the mystery of iniquity had shrouded the earth in the darkness of night.

—St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)
Selected Writings

*How can I help those who are suffering today
because of their faith commitment?*

Martyr (Greek, a witness) identifies one who gives testimony to the faith, even if that means death. In the Early Church, martyrs were the first to be honored as saints. The Church's official listing of saints and blessed is contained in a book still called the *Roman Martyrology*.

Close Encounter of the Ordinary Kind

1 Jn 1:1-4 / Jn 20:1a, 2-8

John the apostle describes with awe how close he had been to the Word of life. How ordinary is our God encounter, right at one's own doorstep in something as simple as a dewdrop on a plain vegetable. I don't know about you, but something in me hesitates to trust revelations of God when they are too ordinary. I like to think that God is mostly revealed in something "big" or outstandingly beautiful, like the Swiss Alps. The truth is, however, that God is being revealed to us every day in those nearest to us, wherever we are. It is how we look for God, what we expect, that makes the difference. Let us give up the high mountains and vast oceans as our major searching places and come home to our simple lives.

—Joyce Rupp
Inviting God In

*How have I experienced God's presence in those
around me during these days of Christmas?*

In biblical times, after visiting the **tomb** on the third day to ensure that the deceased was really dead, the body was not touched for a year and decomposed. Then the bones were collected and stored in an *ossuary* ("bone box") and placed in a niche carved into the wall.

Birth Surrounded by Death

1 Jn 1:5—2:2 / Mt 2:13-18

Christmas is also accompanied, whether we like it or not, by tears. The evangelists did not disguise reality to make it more credible or attractive. Christmas was not a way of hiding from the challenges and injustices of their day. On the contrary, they relate Jesus' birth as an event fraught with tragedy and grief—mothers sobbing and bewailing the death of their children because of Herod's tyranny and unbridled thirst for power. Today too, we hear this heart-rending cry of pain, which we neither desire nor are able to ignore or to silence. In our world we continue to hear the lamentation of so many mothers, of so many families, for the death of their children, their innocent children. Can Christian joy exist if we ignore these cries?

—Pope Francis

How might I join with others to stop the suffering of innocent children throughout the world?

Herod was appointed “King of the Jews” by the Romans (37–4 BC). Although there is no historical evidence for this particular massacre in Bethlehem, he was known for his cruelty and when his rule was threatened he would certainly act quickly and ruthlessly to eliminate any possible rivals.

Suspicion & Fear

1 Jn 2:3-11 / Lk 2:22-35

Those who possess power have an implicit duty—and the opportunity—to serve as God’s deputies. Neither the Roman procurator nor the recognized native rulers made their appearance at the crib to receive ratification of their power. Power becomes destructive in the hands of arrogant totalitarian authority and ruins both the one who wields it and the subjects on whom he exercises it. The tyrant in possession of such power is no longer capable of spiritual sensitivity. He is suspicious of everything that does not fit into the narrow limits of permitted and regimented expression. There was no paragraph in the rules at Jerusalem covering the birth of the child in Bethlehem. Hence the reaction of perplexity and fear and the prompt recourse to the sword.

—Alfred Delp, SJ
Prison Writings

*When has my fear prompted me to blame
others and cause them harm?*

The **Nunc Dimittis** (from the first words “now you dismiss” in Latin) is Simeon’s joyful song upon seeing the baby Jesus in the Temple (Lk 2:29-32) expressing his thanks for having lived to see the Messiah. It is prescribed for use in the Night Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.

Anticipating a New Year

1 Jn 2:12-17 / Lk 2:36-40

When a new year rolls around, we are apt to forget that time is a part of eternity. Each new year is actually a testing and proving ground for eternity, a kind of novitiate in which we say “aye” or “nay” to our eternal destiny, a season of plenty from which we shall later on reap either wheat or weeds. The beginning of a new year is an opportunity for improvement. It makes little difference what the past has been, for we are not to look back to see if the furrow be crooked. What matters most is the sanctification of the now moment. Time is so precious that God doles it out second by second.

—Fulton J. Sheen
On Being Human

*What improvement do I wish to make
to sanctify my life during the coming year?*

When a Jewish mother gave birth to a boy she was ceremonially “unclean” for 40 days (Lv 12:1-8). Then she brought her purification gift to the priest to **“fulfill the prescriptions of the law.”** Being poor, Joseph and Mary offer 2 turtledoves (Lev 12:8) instead of the more costly lamb.

I Must Be in My Father's House

Gn 15:1-6; 21:1-3 / Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19 / Lk 2:22-40

At age 13, a Jewish boy becomes *bar mitzvah*, “a son of the Law,” taking upon himself the responsibility of the commitment made for him by his parents in his circumcision. The year preceding this is spent in preparation, and the trip to Jerusalem for Passover may have been part of Jesus’ training. Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the Temple, God’s house. He is asking and answering questions, the normal Jewish method of learning. In replying to his mother, he expresses the sense of necessity and devotion to God’s will that will characterize his whole life. The experience of God as Father, hitherto claimed only for the covenant people of Israel and for the king, is for Jesus an intimate personal relationship. Yet he returns to Nazareth in obedience and continues to mature in age and wisdom.

—Steve Mueller

*How might I commit myself more fully to growing
in wisdom during the coming year?*

“Oh what remorse we shall feel at the end of our lives, when we look back on all the instructions and examples given by God and the saints that we so carelessly received! If your life ended today, how would you be pleased with the life you have led this year?”

—St. Francis de Sales

Our Daily Advent Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus, we need you!
Draw close to us.
You are the light.
Rouse us from
the slumber of mediocrity.
Awaken us from
the darkness of indifference.
Come, Lord Jesus,
take our distracted hearts
and make them watchful.
Awaken within us the desire
to pray and the need to love.
Help us to remain vigilant,
waiting for You to come,
waiting for You to draw near to us!

—*Pope Francis*