

DAILY DEVOTIONS
for ADVENT

by JOYCE RUPP, osm

Welcome
the Light



Welcome The Light

Daily Devotions for Advent

An enthusiastic dance of hope stirred in me when I began writing this Advent booklet. Almost immediately, my thoughts moved toward Christ's coming into our world as a light-filled being. I thought of how much I have grown spiritually because of this radiant presence, who is my teacher of virtue and companion of love.

Physical light is a precious gift and essential for many things. Imagine our planet without sunshine sustaining and nurturing vegetation. Light is also a valuable treasure for our interior lives. What would we do without intellectual moments of clarity or intuitive glimpses into life's unfolding mystery? No wonder the Gospel of John introduces Jesus with the following description:

*What came to be through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race. (John 1:3-4)*

Christ is our light. In ways parallel to physical illumination, Christ's light provides growth and gives guidance for each step we take on life's journey. This divine radiance draws forth goodness from the seed of our heart, just as the sun's energy draws forth green from a kernel of wheat. Christ's presence comforts and assures us, like a blazing fireplace welcomes and settles those who sit by it.

What better time than Advent to refresh our awareness of Christ's coming to us as divine light? What more appropriate season for opening our minds and hearts to welcome this treasure? May each day we pray with this Advent booklet draw us toward renewed appreciation of Christ's enriching presence. May we allow this inner light to generate kindness and goodwill toward all.

— Joyce Rupp, osm

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As you begin *each day* of Advent prayer, I invite you to use the following approach:

Light a candle. Pause to remember the presence of God filling you with Light and Love.

Pray this opening prayer before reading the reflection for the day:

Radiant Creator, awaken me to your presence.
Jesus, Light of all Lights, kindle love in my heart.
Spirit of Illumination, guide my path today.

Read and ponder the day's reflection.

Set your intention for the day, (Today I will...)

Then, turn back to this page to pray the following closing prayer:

Emmanuel, you are the Everlasting Light.
Help me to bring your love
everywhere I go.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so fully this Advent
that all my life will be a radiance of you.
Shine through me and be so in me
that everyone I come in contact with today
may feel your presence in my spirit.
Let them look and see, not just me,
but you, Light of all Lights,
shining through me. Amen.

(adapted from John Cardinal Newman's prayer)

As you blow out the candle and the light is gone, remember you have a divine light within you that will never go out. You take the light of Christ with you into your day.

First Sunday of Advent

A Faint Hint on the Horizon

Be vigilant at all times . . . Luke 21:36



AS WE ENTER ADVENT, the Gospel urges us to brush the dust off our awareness. We are to become alert to God entering our lives as Emmanuel, the One sent to be our “light forever” (Isaiah 60:19). Becoming vigilant about this radiant presence is like patiently waiting for a sunrise: as we sit in the predawn’s deep darkness, our eyes strain to see form and shape. Gradually a faint hint of light spreads over the sky and we begin to notice outlines of trees, buildings, mountains. Eventually (on a good sunrise day) the entire eastern horizon blazes with glorious color, filling our eyes with beauty.

The people of old waiting for a savior were like people waiting for a sunrise. Eventually the Christ-Light came to dispel what kept them from seeing clearly. The Beloved Child who came to dispel the darkness in human hearts was much greater than a magnificent sunrise. The loving radiance of this divine being in human form blazed through the bleakness of the world, although many were not alert enough to recognize who was living among them.

Advent invites us to turn our hearts toward Emmanuel, who called himself the “light of the world” (John 8:12) and whom John’s Gospel describes as “the light of the human race” (John 1:4). No longer the Babe in Bethlehem, the Risen Christ is always near.

How easy it is to forget God is with us. Advent calls: “Stay awake! Watch for this ever-present love within you and among you. Welcome the wonder of this astounding gift. Share this blessed light with others by your loving deeds.”

Today

I will look for the ways the Divine Light is evident in my life.

Monday, First Week of Advent

Why These Lights?

*If your face shine upon us,
then we shall be safe.* Psalm 80:4

THE FOUR CANDLES of the Advent wreath indicate four weeks of waiting, of course, but why use *candles* as the symbol for the passage of time? Why not add a flower to a vase each week or turn the hand of a clock instead of lighting a candle?

The use of light reminds us that Emmanuel came as a shining radiance into a turbulent world, one much in need of his healing presence. In the Gospel stories it is easy to see how Jesus is filled with light. Love easily flows forth from his compassionate presence. His whole self radiates warmth and goodness. Everywhere he goes, the inner light of his God-ness, his goodness, shines out to others. No wonder people are drawn to him.

Saints in literature and history are often recognized or depicted by a glow or an aura of light around them. There is something about them that draws others into their presence. This “something” is the light of God’s goodness radiating forth from them. The Sufi poet Hafiz suggests that God kisses us on the forehead in the morning and lights “a Holy Lamp” inside our hearts. What an inspiring image for us to carry this Advent as we welcome the presence of Emmanuel each day. Every morning as we awaken, the first thing to remember is that our inner being is a lantern of God’s love. This eternal flame of goodness is at the core of who we are. As this divine love permeates us, we will increasingly live as a loving reflection of Christ’s light.

Today

I will pray for the part of myself that needs God’s light to
shine more fully within it.

Tuesday, First Week of Advent

Seeing with the Eyes of Christ

Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. Luke 10:23

WE CAN HAVE THE BEST eyes in the world, but in pitch-black darkness, our eyes are of little use to us. We need light in order to see our way. Advent is a season for Christ, our Light, to break through our spiritual darkness. When I consider the shadows that pervade my heart, they are usually the results of the way I *see* things. This seeing involves illusory notions I have of other persons, limited understandings of a situation, and unreal expectations that I foist upon others.

Sometimes my lack of seeing is due to my failure to know myself as I truly am or because my blind spots hide a part of myself from me. It always takes a while before I have the *eyes* to see how foolish my thoughts, feelings and actions are. I come to see more clearly when I accept the guidance and insight offered to me by the Indwelling Christ. The light of this inner guidance is essential for my spiritual growth and well-being. Without this divine direction I would continually judge others falsely and unkindly.

Jesus told his disciples they were fortunate to be able to see what they did. He helped them look beyond and beneath their limited perceptions to the deeper reality of each one's goodness. Jesus continually guided his disciples by the light of his message, encouraging them to understand and accept the kingdom of love. It was up to them to follow and live out the clarity he offered to them.

Today

I will look with the eyes of Christ on one person or situation that causes me distress.

Wednesday, First Week of Advent

Comfort Amid Distress

*The Lord GOD will wipe away
the tears from all faces. Isaiah 25:8*

ADVENT IS MY FAVORITE Church season. The combination of hope and joy inherent in this rich period of anticipation and remembrance stirs my heart with renewed confidence in God's abiding presence. But I do not always feel Advent's optimism right away. It might take the whole four weeks for this stirring to happen, but the turn toward renewed hope is well worth the wait.

Few of us will go through the four weeks of Advent without some burden, some struggle that seems an inescapable part of our lives. And we are not alone, for in many parts of our world, the absence of joy and hope are keenly felt. This time of year is not a happy one for those who are experiencing hurts such as grief, financial stress or persistent warfare. Others struggle with living with AIDS, worry about rebellious children, the challenges of remaining faithful to recovery programs, or feelings of uselessness due to aging or extended disability. We all know someone in need of hope in his or her life. We all have a relative, friend or coworker who reminds us that joy is something many desire and lack.

The distraught and distressed are part of our Advent preparation. If we have the heart of Jesus, we will desire consolation not only for ourselves but for all whose faces are filled with tears. Our inner Source of Light offers us assurance, care and comfort amid the unwanted parts of our days. Let us turn inward, rest in this loving light, and daily extend God's great love to others through our prayer and our compassionate action.

Today

I will bring into my prayer and my heart someone who
is hurting right now.

Thursday, First Week of Advent

Sitting in the Light of Silence

Though I sit in darkness, the LORD is my light. Micah 7:8

WHEN I PONDER THE GIFTS of physical light, I think of my friend Dorothy who was blind for almost forty years. She literally sat in the darkness. One of the many qualities I admired about Dorothy was her faithfulness to contemplative prayer. Every day she sat quietly in the dark for long spaces of time and communed with God. She did this not because she had nothing else to do, but because she resonated deeply with the divine light in her soul. There was no bitterness about her blindness, no ill will in her heart toward those who had good vision, no despair about her need to rely on others for certain necessities of life. Instead, Dorothy entrusted herself daily to God with total assurance of receiving the strength and guidance she needed. She went through many Advents and knew her inner light was of greater importance than physical vision.

Like Dorothy, we need a deep trust in God to lead and guide us through the day. Those of us who are sighted also require essential quiet spaces of contemplation. In this prayer time we gather the pieces of our lives and present them to the Holy One. We ask that who we are and what we do be for the good of all humankind. We open ourselves to receive what we need for the day so that we will be more fully in union with Emmanuel. When we do so, we receive enough confidence and hope to live the unfolding day well.

Today

I will sit quietly, close my eyes to create a dark space, and
entrust myself to God.

Friday, First Week of Advent

Inner Tyrants Overthrown

*But a very little while,
and Lebanon shall be changed into an orchard,
and the orchard be regarded as a forest!* Isaiah 29:17

ISAIAH PRESENTS AN IMAGE of a huge change. When this transformation occurs, “the lowly will ever find joy in the LORD, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (verse 19). There are echoes of Mary’s Magnificat in this passage from Isaiah. Both passages offer assurance that “the tyrant will be no more.” In her canticle of praise, Mary acknowledges she is special in God’s eyes, but she does not consider herself better than others. On the contrary, Mary continues her prayerful song by focusing on the mercy and compassion of God. She proclaims that God will raise the lowly and put down the mighty (Luke 1:51-52).

On hearing of tyrants and the mighty, one immediately thinks of political oppressors or anyone who wields power over another. Besides these external despots, there are also persistent *inner* tyrants hidden within the human heart. These tyrants are the strong opinions, unyielding feelings and critical demands that convince us everyone must accept our approach and views, no matter what the consequences. These inner tyrants urge us to lord our supposed truth over others, forcing them under the sway of our tightly held notions of how they ought to think and to act.

As we go about our busy lives this Advent, let us toss out our inner tyrants to make room for the divine mercy and compassion so beautifully described in Mary’s Magnificat. Then we will have an orchard of joy in our lives, and others will be able to share in it.

Today

I will search my heart for inner tyrants and dethrone them.

Saturday, First Week of Advent

A Place of Refuge

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom should I fear?*

*The LORD is my life's refuge;
of whom should I be afraid?* Psalm 27:1

GOD'S ABIDING REFUGE and comforting shelter stands out in the Advent Scripture passages. These messages promise that a land in deathlike darkness will soon be filled with resurgent light. The prophets announce peace to those who live in turmoil and distress. They provide the downtrodden and sorrowful with a reason for elation. The prophet Isaiah confidently assures his listeners of a new era in which God will embrace them with mercy and compassion.

These Advent teachings deepen our awareness of the inherent hope and consolation of Christ's coming. The Advent Scriptures, likewise, constantly remind us that in sending Emmanuel to us, God assures us of an unending relationship with Eternal Love. This divine presence is a "light and salvation" that will comfort us in our dark times and lead us to a grace-filled peace.

In the Gospels, God is made known through both the words and actions of Jesus. Those who come to Jesus are physically healed, blessed with deeper faith and restored to spiritual health. No matter what sort of life they lead or how unkempt spiritually they are, Jesus welcomes all into his forgiving embrace. Both his preaching and his healing reveal the abounding tenderness, infinite mercy and immeasurable understanding that God has for each of us. On this closing day of the first week of Advent, we are held in the embrace of this ever-present God. Once more we welcome this light-filled presence, the source of all goodness and compassion. Let us lean into this divine embrace and welcome the love being offered to us.

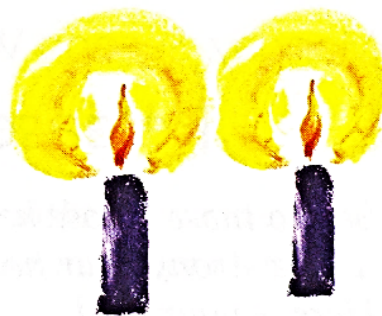
Today

I will seek the consoling embrace of Christ in
the sore spots of my life.

Second Sunday of Advent

Accepting the Challengers

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths."* Luke 3:4



JOHAN THE BAPTIST PREPARED the way for the entrance of Jesus. John preached in such a way that minds and hearts were opened to hear the message of the Messiah when he arrived. On this second Sunday of Advent we might ask ourselves: Who are our messengers? How do they prepare the way for us to welcome the Christ in one another? Are we open and receptive to these unexpected envoys who can lead us to a fuller experience of the presence of God? Advent is the season to ready ourselves to receive the divine light, however it comes to us.

My messengers are many and varied. Sometimes they are good people who do not know they are Christ's heralds of change. They are simply living their lives as best they can. They give witness to the divine light by how they love and generously give of themselves. Someone willing to donate a kidney, parents patiently loving and unselfishly giving of themselves for their children, long-term caregivers who extend continual kindness to the ill—all these messengers move me to be bigger-hearted and less self-oriented.

Sometimes welcoming Christ's emissaries challenges me greatly. Not all of John the Baptist's listeners wanted to hear his message. People I resist or do not especially like are also prophets preparing the way for the Christ to enter my life. Such people are Emmanuel's messengers, too, because they help me cast out the darkness of my egotism, prejudice and small-mindedness by shedding light upon the darkness of my closed, inner spaces.

Today

I will think about my messengers of light and
write a note of gratitude to one of them.

Monday, Second Week of Advent

Released from Fear's Prison

Say to those whose hearts are frightened:

Be strong, fear not!

Here is your God . . . Isaiah 35:4

IS THERE ANY ONE OF US who has not had a strong fear about something at one time or another? Our fears are as varied as we are. Many of us carry concerns about our inability to be the best we want to be in some aspect of our life. We have fears about our spiritual growth, not being good enough in our vocation or not being able to age well. We wonder whether we can manage our own problems as we strive to live up to our own and others' expectations.

Fear can keep us from getting in touch with and sharing Christ's light within us. Fear imprisons us, diverting our good energy into doubts, anxieties and worries. A Eucharistic minister named Jane told me how fear almost kept her from being a Christ-light to someone else. One day Jane heard about an elderly Catholic woman in her neighborhood who fell, broke her hip and was unable to walk. Jane struggled with whether or not to call and offer to bring the Eucharist. Because she did not know the woman, Jane feared giving offense or causing distress to her. What if she did not want to receive Communion, and the call made her feel guilty? Jane overcame her fear and telephoned anyhow. Upon hearing the offer of Eucharist, the disabled woman exclaimed joyfully, "Oh, I've been longing to receive Communion!"

Let us open our fearful places, welcome the Eternal Light who came to dwell among us, and be brave enough to share this light with others.

Today

I will let go of one fear or anxiety I have and
place it in Emmanuel's care.

Tuesday, Second Week of Advent

A Woman Clothed in Light

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Revelation 12:1

THE FEAST OF OUR LADY of Guadalupe opens with a verse from the Book of Revelation in which a woman is clothed with the brilliance of the sun. The moon glows beneath her feet and a magnificent circle of twelve stars surrounds her head. Imagine the radiance of this beloved woman whom the Church sees symbolically as Mary. She whose title by theologians is *Theotokos*, a Greek word meaning *God-Bearer*, is covered from top to bottom with light!

When Mary appeared to the peasant Juan Diego, however, she was not clothed with the brilliance of heavenly light but with the simple, beautiful dress of his people. Her immense radiance was hidden. Mary chose, instead, to reveal herself in the appearance of someone whose life contained a basic, human ordinariness.

The noted author Jean Vanier describes Mary as being “transparent with love.” Mary, the God-Bearer, brings a message of God’s maternal care. Love shines through this vessel of the Divine. The clothes of Our Lady of Guadalupe carry a visible message that Emmanuel continues to come into this world through the commonplace way of humanity. *We are now bearers of the Christ-Light.*

Unlike the pregnant Mary, we do not hold the flesh and blood of Jesus within us. Rather, we carry the Spirit of the Risen Christ in the temple of our souls. As with Our Lady of Guadalupe, this divine radiance is hidden in the folds of our everyday existence. No matter who we are, we can bring Emmanuel to others.

Today

I will be aware of how I am a God-Bearer, no matter how ordinary my life might seem.

Wednesday, Second Week of Advent

Deep Rest

[Jesus said], "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28

THOUGH NOT EVEN THE MIDDLE of Advent, advertisements have already been announcing how many shopping days are left until Christmas. This pressure, plus the stressors of sending cards, preparing to visit or be visited, and getting done what *must get done*, can leave many of us feeling burdened, perhaps even overwhelmed.

Where will we discover rest? How can we go about finding it? What will help us to welcome it? How can Jesus' promise of rest help us with our burdens? The *rest* that Jesus spoke of is more than a good night's sleep. It is the deeper peace that comes when we slow down inside, when we allow ourselves to let go of our self-made burdens, as well as the ones that society imposes on us. Can we let go of reading the newspaper for a few days in order to have sufficient prayer time? Can we forego getting our cards out before Christmas so we can enjoy our family and friends more? Can we resist our drive for perfection or production and let our pride take a blow when we do not achieve what we have planned?

Some burdens and troubles will remain. Illness of loved ones, family struggles and work-related deadlines don't go away just because Christmas is coming. But we can change our attitude toward these things. We can place our troubles in the arms of God and let go of our desire to manage life all by ourselves. The *rest* that Jesus promises is waiting for us, just as surely as the Messiah came to a world in need of peace.

Today

I will place something that seems especially burdensome to me in God's loving care.

Thursday, Second Week of Advent

A Life of Witnessing

He came for testimony, to testify to the light . . . John 1:7

THROUGHOUT ADVENT, the Mass Scriptures remind us of the ministry of John the Baptist. They help us appreciate how powerfully this precursor of Jesus witnessed to the coming of God's Son. Thanks to John, people were able to recognize and experience Jesus. Like John, we have the immense privilege of being able to *testify to the light* which Jesus brought to our world.

How can we testify to Christ today? John did it by preaching. Our testimony to Christ's presence is mainly through the way we live our lives. Thomas Merton described it this way: "Love comes out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us . . . So we all become doors and windows through which God shines back into [God's] own house."

Usually we do not know that others are receiving our silent testimony. We simply try to live our lives in a Christ-like manner. A convert to Catholicism recently explained his conversion this way: "I saw how my wife and children handled themselves. They never pressured me to become a Catholic. It was the way they lived that convinced me of the validity of what they believed."

If others are to perceive God's love through us, our window must be clear enough for the light to be seen. It may be time to clean our inner window, to change some unloving attitudes or behavior. Christmas is definitely the time to let the great light of Christ pour forth from us.

Today

I will be a window through which
God's love and beauty shine.

Friday, Second Week of Advent

Divine Guidance

I, the LORD, your God . . .

lead you on the way you should go. Isaiah 48:17

AT COUNTLESS TIMES I turn inward and pray for divine guidance. In those moments, I seek God's light as I search for the choice that will bring about the most good. Some days I simply need assurance that I am united with the Holy One. Sometimes I pause at my computer and ask Holy Wisdom to direct my thoughts and emotions. Other days I reach for guidance when I am trying to make an appropriate response to someone who is asking me to give of my time.

There are also times when my inner world feels bleak, and I seek the light of faith to lead me toward a sunnier day. I find both confidence and strength in knowing that the Spirit of Emmanuel, God-with-us, will always provide the light my life needs to guide me through the varied experiences each day holds.

I cannot imagine anyone not requiring this light to accompany them through their day. Divine assistance is essential for spiritual growth because life constantly places many options before us. It is challenging to respond as a person of generous love, because our natural propensity is to be self-absorbed, concerned mainly with our own interests. Sometimes taking care of ourselves is the best choice, but many times it is not. As we focus on welcoming the light of Emmanuel, we have a golden opportunity to allow ourselves to be guided toward decisions based on the generous love of Christ for one another.

Today

I will ask for the light of divine guidance at
least once during the day.

Saturday, Second Week of Advent

The Fire of Forgiveness

*Till like a fire there appeared the prophet
whose words were as a flaming furnace. Sirach 48:1*

ELIJAH COMES AS A FIERY figure with words as hot as a furnace. Like other prophets, Elijah speaks with great passion. His fervent words are ablaze with the message of God. The author of Sirach tells us that Elijah's central purpose is to restore a good relationship between God and the people. One of the ways the prophet hopes to do this is to "turn back the hearts of fathers toward their sons" (verse 10). It takes the fire of Christ-like love to turn back hearts and bring about forgiveness. It takes the kind of fire that purifies pride, immolates anger, sears bitterness, and makes ashes of stubbornness.

Being kind to irritating individuals is difficult, but what I find most challenging is having to forgive those who have intentionally hurt me. How to let go of the pain? How to untangle the wounded emotions? How to stop wishing ill will and start desiring goodwill? There is no easy way to let go and let be. Yet forgiveness is high on the list of the qualities Jesus requires of his followers.

The absence of forgiveness often surfaces during Advent and Christmas, when we become more conscious of those we keep out of our hearts. This is the season to set our hearts at peace, to pray for a fire like Elijah's to set love ablaze and burn away whatever keeps us from moving on from old hurts. Let us welcome the love of Emmanuel and allow it to help us turn our hearts toward those we find difficult to forgive.

Today

I will turn my heart toward someone who has hurt me.

Third Sunday of Advent

Fueled by Faith

Exhorting them in many other ways, [John the Baptist] preached good news to the people. Luke 3:18



JESUS PRAISED HIS MUCH-LOVED cousin, John the Baptist, on several occasions. He saw John as a burning and shining lamp, afire with enthusiasm. Jesus valued his cousin's passionate commitment. Like a lamp whose flame burns steadily with sufficient oil, so John was filled with a confident belief that Jesus was the one whom all should follow. That is, until John was tossed into prison. Then the light of John's lamp began to flicker. He sent his disciples back to Jesus to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Matthew 11:3).

The oil of faith that fed John's lamp suddenly diminished because of his life's drastic change. No longer was John in charge of his life. He sat in prison, unable to preach and bear witness. No doubt he felt he had failed, or worse, that he had been duped into a ministry that seemed hopeless.

I can identify with John the Baptist. Although I have never languished in prison as he did, I also experience the oil of faith in my own lamp diminish at times when things don't go the way I want them to go. The oil level goes down when loved ones die, when my schedule gets overly pressured or when my hopes for world peace grow dim. It is easy to be alive and enthusiastic about the things of God when life is going well. When life takes a nose-dive, then it is challenging to be that radiant lamp of faith.

Today

I will refill the oil in my inner lamp by seeking more trust in God and letting go of discouragement.

Monday, Third Week of Advent

Listening to the Word

The utterance of one who hears what God says . . . Numbers 24:16

IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS chapters 23 and 24, Balaam speaks several oracles or utterances about how God will respond to the people. Balaam would not have been able to do this unless he listened wholeheartedly to God. We, too, are called to listen closely, not in order to prophesy about the future, but so we can be more at one with God in order to live our potential of goodness as fully as possible.

Listening to God is vital if we are to be windows through whom Christ's light shines. That is why being overly busy in Advent can keep us from entering fully into the meaning of Christmas. There is nothing wrong with being busy and enjoying the atmosphere of Christmas preparations. However, we can get caught in an excess of external goings-on and forget what Advent is truly proclaiming. It is easy to miss how God is present with us when we are too preoccupied with other details of life. We can forget to pray, become oblivious to our thoughts and feelings, and succumb to moody irritability because of an overabundance of activities.

If we are going to enter into the beauty of Christ's coming, we will have to pause and reflect on how his coming affects us personally. We will need to listen to the voice within that tells us how to let our presence resonate with love. When we take time for this kind of recollection, we will also more readily recognize the light of Christ shining forth from others.

Today

I will slow down enough to listen
for the way Emmanuel is revealed in my life.

Tuesday, Third Week of Advent

Carrying God's Light to Others

... Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah. Matthew 1:16

THE ADVENT LITURGY OFTEN includes the genealogy of Jesus which threads a long history of ancestors until it comes to Jesus' own birth. There are all sorts of individuals on his family tree. Some are of royal birth, but many are ordinary individuals like the shepherd Abraham, with whom the ancestry begins.

Did any of those ancestors know how important their place in history was? Probably not. Yet it took every person to bring Jesus forth. Each ancestor's life led to the next. No one's life was insignificant. Their heritage was not just about physical inheritance and genes. It was about the faith of people whose daily efforts included struggling with their own personal character defects and failings. These ancestors would have been amazed to find they held the seed of Emmanuel within them.

We might also feel insignificant or unimportant. Our imperfections can convince us we are not worthy to carry God's light to others. In spite of how we might view our personal inadequacies or inconsequential lives, each of us holds the potential of being a carrier of God's goodness. Each of us is meant to be a revelation of divine love.

I would never have joined a religious community or become a writer had it not been for a professor in my first year of college. It was she who asked me if I had ever considered being a Servite sister. Although she did not know it, that question changed my life forever. Because of her question she became one of my vital spiritual ancestors.

Today

I will offer thanks for my ability to be a
spiritual ancestor of faith for others.

Wednesday, Third Week of Advent

Making New Plans

The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home." Matthew 1:20

MARY SAID "YES" to God's request to be the mother of Jesus. Fortunately for humankind, Joseph also responded positively to God's invitation. When Joseph learned of Mary's pregnancy, he intended to keep his integrity. He made up his mind to be kind to Mary and divorce her quietly so she would not be exposed to shame. How alarmed and surprised Joseph was when he discovered more was expected of him. The angel's words in his dream are the same as the angel's to Mary: "Do not be afraid." Any peace Joseph might have had about his original decision flew swiftly away. The angel's appearance startled Joseph, but what really shook Mary's future husband was God's request to revisit his carefully worked-out plan and revise his intentions.

The dream held out a huge spiritual opportunity for Joseph. He could have easily said "no." He could have left Mary, opted out of any personal responsibility and gone on with his life. Socially and legally, this would have been acceptable. There was so much risk involved in saying "yes" to God. Yet Joseph found enough faith and courage to discard his original plan. He was generous with his love and unselfish to the point of risking his reputation and future by marrying a young pregnant girl whose child was not his. What a magnificent Light-Bearer Joseph was! His witness gives each of us the courage to let our carefully carved-out plans unravel a bit when God invites us to take a risk for the sake of loving another.

Today

I will risk saying a kind word or doing a good deed for
the sake of love.

Thursday, Third Week of Advent

Hoping in the Light

*The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a mighty savior. Zephaniah 3:17*

JESUS CAME TO DWELL in the world and, in so doing, he brought the potential for a peaceful existence to all creation. In spite of the gift of his immense love, the world today is still in great need of the peace that was born with his coming. We do not have to look far for reasons to be discouraged. Many are disheartened by the situation of countries at war, political corruption, senseless violence, unabated poverty, countless deaths due to treatable diseases, sexual travesties against the young, and much more. Yet we cannot give in to despair or allow our hearts to be without hope when we yearn for an end to the violent struggles and financial disparity in our world. In this season when we welcome again the beloved Christ into our midst, it is essential that we remember how each of us is now a carrier of God's transforming love. The Child of Love who came to us gives us the opportunity each day to bring more of that love into a broken world.

Clarissa Pinkola-Estes writes, "Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do." Our love can be a candle in the darkness. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, every one of our good-hearted responses can bring peace to those who struggle. Each act of love can generate more goodness.

Today

I will trust that my efforts of kindness are bringing hope to
the world's discouragement.

Friday, Third Week of Advent

Trusting the Road of Faith

*I will turn darkness into light before them,
and make crooked ways straight.* Isaiah 42:16

“CROOKED WAYS” ON A ROAD is an image suggesting a limited view, a path angling around with curves and unexpected bends. Those turns cause the road’s crookedness and prevent the way ahead from being clearly seen. When we peer into the Advent Scriptures, we see how hidden the road was for Mary and Joseph after they had responded positively to God. Neither one knew for sure where they were headed. They had only the promise of God through an angel that Mary’s womb would bear an amazing child whose coming would change the world forever. Mary and Joseph walked the road of their life in faith, trusting that the crooked ways would be made straight, that the road ahead would be doable because God was with them.

There are situations in our lives when we, too, long for a straighter, clearer road ahead. However, none of us is given a definite view or a comprehensible picture of our future. Mythologist Joseph Campbell said that if we look down the road and see a straight path before us, we can be sure it is not *our* path.

Life isn’t that way. We have to walk into the mystery of our many ups and downs, turns and bends, with trust in God to guide us. The coming of Christ into our lives helps us to accept the curves and twists of life as essential parts of our spiritual path. Someday our crooked paths will be made straight but, for now, we walk the road of faith as Mary and Joseph did.

Today

I will let go of my desire to see far ahead on my crooked path of life.

Saturday, Third Week of Advent

The Gift of Light

*I formed you, and set you
as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations . . .
to bring out prisoners from confinement,
and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.* Isaiah 42:6-7

THE PROMISES OF ISAIAH foretold how the birth of Jesus would affect the world. His coming would offer freedom to those held in any sort of bondage that kept them from being their true selves and having inner peace. The image of a dark dungeon is very powerful. Imagine being prisoners sitting in a bleak existence and having someone come with a light to lead them out to freedom. What a gift this would be! The coming of Christ into the darkness of a person's life is like this gift.

There are many prisoners sitting in darkness. People are imprisoned because of their religious beliefs and courageous stands for justice. Countless people are symbolically imprisoned in dungeons of darkness. Their imprisonment includes depression, constant loneliness, extended grief, mental illness, poor self-esteem, arrogant hostility, and numerous other forms of suffering that keep the fullness of life from them.

Why not give them the gift of light this Christmas? Light breaks through dreariness: give a cheerful message to the lonely or write to a political prisoner. Light enkindles: spark a fire by affirming someone who is depressed or out of sorts. Light warms: speak a kind word or withhold criticism of a child or a spouse. Light comforts: talk to the grieving, listen to a worrier, tend to the ill. Light guides: lead by example, be a witness of love.

Today

I will decide how to give the gift of light this Christmas and begin doing it right now.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

God's Life Within

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb . . . Luke 1:41



IMAGINE THE SPARKS OF LIGHT that danced, not only in the womb, but in the eyes and hearts of Mary and Elizabeth as these two God-filled women greeted one another! A compassionate, unselfish love brought the two women together. When I ponder Mary's visit to Elizabeth, I envision a young, pregnant woman thinking about someone other than herself. Mary endured the long, uncomfortable journey for the sake of her older, pregnant cousin. In turn, an aging, wise woman delighted in humbly receiving Mary's kind, eager help. They overjoyed each other by welcoming the loving light emanating from each other's presence.

Generosity of heart, along with enthusiasm for welcoming and being welcomed, speaks volumes as we reflect on Christmas. Christ's light came to Elizabeth through the tabernacle of Mary's womb. Their greeting of one another was a Eucharistic moment. While we do not carry the flesh and blood of Christ, we do carry his Holy Spirit within us.

When we choose to be with another in a generous and unselfish way, does this divine power not soar joyfully within us as well? Every day we can have experiences of God's love leaping in us by the way we talk to and tend to one another. Single and married, young and old, children and adults, friends and colleagues, infirm and healthy—all can greet one another in the spirit of Mary and Elizabeth. All it takes is a generous heart that wants to share love and a humble, open heart ready to receive that love.

Today

I will enter Christmas by welcoming each person with the heart of Mary and Elizabeth.

Please note: since the length of Advent varies from year to year, you may need to substitute a later devotion for one of the days of the Fourth Week.

Christmas Eve

Christ, Born in Us

*... because of the tender mercy of our God
by which the daybreak from on high will visit us
to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow,
to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:78-79*

WHEN JESUS WAS BORN, the compassion of God most truly broke into the world. Ever since that blessed event, the Light of Christ has illuminated the world's darkness with the power of divine love. Christmas celebrates this amazing presence. Thomas Merton's writing emphasizes that God continues to bless the world with Christ's love through our humanity: "Christ is born in us today in order that he may appear to the whole world through us." We are now the carriers of God's love. Our hearts are now Christ's Bethlehem. Although Jesus was born physically over two thousand years ago, he is spiritually birthed every time a loving act is generated by the Creator and lived through us in some way.

The birthing of Christ in us and through us happens every day, but we focus on it particularly as we celebrate Christmas. Whatever we do, be it participating in joy-filled Eucharistic liturgies, gathering with loved ones for special food and the opening of presents, or enjoying games and seasonal entertainment, it is always through love that Christ enters our lives. Christ is born in us through our unselfish kindness, gracious help, generous patience, understanding acceptance, compassionate care, and many other ordinary loving gestures.

Look for love and be love this Christmas season. Remember Emmanuel is God-with-us. This great love continues to light up the darkness of our world today through human vessels like ourselves. We contain an enormous potential for Christmas-ing one another. Let's do it today.

Today

I will welcome the coming of Christ and
let his light shine through me.

Christmas Day

Break Free of Gloom

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
a light has shone. Isaiah 9:1*

THE COMING OF JESUS startled the world. He was filled with an astounding love which emanated from him like sunlight. The beauty of this unconditional love and the immensity of his wisdom permeated the bleak places of many hearts. Those who came into his presence experienced a drawing power. The grieving, the searching, the forlorn, the ill, the alienated—all those bearing any form of *gloom* within themselves were moved by the compassion of Jesus. They gathered on hillsides to listen to his teaching. Some left their work and became his disciples. Others repented of their sinful ways. Everywhere Jesus had a powerful effect on people because the light within him could not be contained.

Many people today dwell in a land of gloom. For them, Christmas is a time of loneliness, isolation, depression and melancholy. We meet these people everywhere: exhausted parish ministers, lonely elderly, worried cancer patients, grumpy family members, sorrowful grieving friends. It may be that we ourselves are experiencing a sense of dreariness within. This gloom is often more pronounced in the Christmas season when we are encouraged to have joy and enthusiasm.

How can we help others, or ourselves, to break free from the dark gloominess? One of the best ways is to draw near to the heart of Emmanuel. Pray to discover what causes the bleakness of mind or heart. Seek to change what can be changed, and accept what cannot. Joy may not be present in the way we desire it, but our union with Emmanuel will generate inner peace for us and among us.

Today

I will draw near to Emmanuel.

Time to Receive the Light

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1:5

THE LETTERS OF JOHN repeatedly describe God as a God of love and light who is ever with us. What if we not only *believe* God is always with us, but are consistently *aware* of this alluring and enduring presence? Imagine how different our Christmas days would be. They would take on a peaceful quality and a loving nuance that would surprise us.

When we awoke in the morning, amazing hospitality would quickly stir in us. We would arise with a hope-filled sense of wonder at the awesome reality of God's closeness. As we moved through the day, we would be startled at the ease and stillness filling our hearts. If we faced difficult or challenging aspects of the day, we would approach them confidently, knowing we had access to divine guidance through our inner light. We would meet each person with reverence because of our awareness of God's loving presence within them too. When it came time to rest our heads on our pillows, we would sense a beautiful contentment and gratitude as we closed our eyes. How easy it would be to fall asleep in the arms of God.

Christmas celebrates the presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us. Each year we are invited to deepen our realization and appreciation of this magnificent source of love, given to us freely and unconditionally. Every Christmas encourages us to reawaken to the marvel of divine presence. God will always be a God of light and of love. Now is the time to open ourselves as fully as possible to this great gift.

Today

I will remember to end my day with gratitude for
Emmanuel's presence.

God's Messengers

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. Luke 2:9

WHAT WOULD THE CHRISTMAS story be without angels? Messengers of God abound in the Scripture passages about Jesus' birth. Angels visit Mary, Joseph and Zechariah. When Jesus is born, *a multitude of the heavenly host* gathers to announce the great news to the shepherds.

In every instance, fear rises in the human heart when the angels appear on the scene. What is it about angels that creates such a fright in those they greet? Perhaps it is their sudden, unexpected appearance or maybe it is the message the angels bring that causes such a frightening stir. In any case, angels never seem to be immediately welcomed by those they visit. The good news is that each person or group eventually gets over their fright and takes to heart the angel's message from God.

This Christmastide, angels will visit us. They may come in the guise of strangers or unexpected persons who enter our lives uninvited. These angels will not wear wings and white robes. Instead, they will be clothed in human attire. They may even be people we know quite well. Their message will come in veiled disguise, bringing each of us an essential message: "Let Christ be born in you by allowing his love to shine through you. Go the extra mile. Do the generous deed. Give from both your abundance and your poverty. Cheer the sad of heart." None of these things is that difficult to do. We just need to get over being afraid of what these deeds of love might cost us.

Today

I will watch for an angel and heed God's message as best I can.

Guided by Love

And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

Matthew 2:9

THE STORY OF THE MAGI reaches into our hearts with easy familiarity because it connects symbolically with our lives. The end of the Magi's story is joyful, but the journey to reach the place of Christ's birth is challenging. Their journey took a long time, and the star they followed was not always visible. They questioned whether they were going in the right direction, whether the road actually led to a newborn king.

Our direction toward fuller relationship with God may also be hidden for a time. We may not have a sense of how Christ is birthed in us. Joy and peace may be difficult to find. Caryll Houselander describes this in *The Reed of God*: "We shall not see Christ's radiance in our lives yet; it is still hidden in our darkness; nevertheless, we must believe that he is growing in our lives; we must believe it so firmly that we cannot help relating everything, literally everything, to this most incredible reality." Houselander emphasizes that we must not try to force the growth of Christ in us but have "a deep gratitude for the light burning secretly in our darkness . . ."

If we believe that God is guiding us as the star guided the Magi, then all we need to do is continually extend our love to this indwelling presence. We will find our way. We, too, will someday experience a clearer awareness of how and where the Holy One resides in our lives. Like the Magi, we will not lose heart.

Today

I will look for the star that leads me to Christ and
rejoice when I behold it.

A Beacon of Hope

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen . . . Luke 2:20

LIKE THE SHEPHERDS DRAWN to visit the newly born Christ, we have been led to rediscover how this divine love is birthed in us and one another. We need only look into the eyes of another human being to sense the deeper connection we have. We see that Christ lives on in each of us. Every person of loving presence is a sanctuary lamp assuring our world: *Christ is present here*. What will we do now as we proceed forward? Will we remember Christ is born in our world today through our love? Will we be unafraid to share this rich treasure? Will we allow our inner light to comfort and guide us when we experience our own darkness? Will we be a beacon of hope and a lantern of love to a world weary with injustice and hostility?

As we reach the completion of our intentional journey in welcoming the light of Christ, I invite you to do the following: pause to close your eyes; go deep within yourself to where the radiant light of divinity dwells; greet Christ's presence in the form of this gentle yet strong radiance; be aware of how this light surrounds and enfolds your entire being; rest for awhile in this radiance of God; ask for the grace to share this great love as fully as you can as you move into the new year; express your gratitude for the profound gift of being a temple of divine love.

Today

I will write a brief statement of how I hope to continue *welcoming Christ's light*. I will read it often in the coming months.

A Christmas Prayer

Source of divine Light, Emmanuel, God-with-us,
your radiant love illuminated our waiting world
with the surprise of your Bethlehem birth.

Each year since then we celebrate this astonishing event,
rejoicing in your coming anew, not as a newborn Babe,
but as the hidden presence of divinity contained within each of us.
To our great astonishment, we have become your dwelling place.
We are now your Bethlehem.

Now you are Treasure birthed in the secret place of our soul.
Now you are Light gleaming through our gestures of generosity.
Now you are Hope radiating inside the core of our courage.
Now you are Joy shining into the dark caves of our gloom.
Now you are Peace glowing quietly in the crevice of our anxiety.
Now you are Love brilliantly reflected within our kindness.

O Christ, Light of all lights, Star of all stars,
dweller within these human homes of ours,
open our wandering minds and hesitant hearts
so your endless goodness radiates more completely in us.

We welcome you again and again, with gratitude and trust,
not only in this Christmas season of remembrance and celebration
but all through the new year that awaits us.

— Joyce Rupp