

WATCHING FOR CHRIST'S ADVENT



CHURCH OF THE
SAVIOR

Advent Retreat
December 1, 2018

MORNING PRAYER

OPENING SENTENCE

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.
(Isaiah 40:5)

Leader: Our King and Savior draws near

People: *O come, let us adore him.*

CANTICLE: THE SONG OF THE REDEEMED

O ruler of the universe, Lord God,
Great deeds are they that you have done,
Surpassing human understanding.
Your ways are ways of righteousness and truth,
O King of all the ages.
Who can fail to do you homage, Lord,
And sing the praises of your Name?
For you only are the Holy One.
All nations will draw near and fall down before you,
Because your just and holy works have been revealed.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

PSALM 24

- ¹ The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world and all who dwell therein.
² For it is he who founded it upon the seas
and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep.
³ "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord?
and who can stand in his holy place?"

- ⁴ “Those who have clean hands and a pure heart,
who have not pledged themselves to falsehood,
nor sworn by what is a fraud.
- ⁵ They shall receive a blessing from the Lord
and a just reward from the God of their salvation.”
- ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
of those who seek your face, O God of Jacob.
- ⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in.
- ⁸ “Who is this King of glory?”
“The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.”
- ⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates;
lift them high, O everlasting doors;
and the King of glory shall come in.
- ¹⁰ “Who is he, this King of glory?”
“The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.”

LESSON

God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

(Romans 5:5)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.*

COLLECT

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

GRACE

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Romans 15:13)

WATCHING FOR CHRIST'S ADVENT IN TWO MOVEMENTS:

*The Movement of Longing
and
The Movement of Joy*

THE MOVEMENT OF LONGING

In the season of Advent, we enter into a holy longing with all the saints that have come before us and will come after us. We acknowledge our waiting for the advent, the coming, of Christ, and all the wholeness and healing he brings.

At the beginning of this Advent season, what do you find yourself longing for? Spend some time reflecting on this question as openly and honestly as you can.

Longing -- yearning, pining, craving, ache, burning, hunger, thirst -- can take many forms. For some, it is a subtle sense of things not being quite right in the world. For others, or at other times, it is stronger, manifesting in deep sadness or grief, maybe depression and even moments of despair. Other times, longing may come out as anger, outrage, or hurt towards the injustices, broken relationships, effects of sin in the various arenas of our world. Or sometimes it is just disorientation or the feeling of being overwhelmed.

How are you experiencing longing?

Longing is often uncomfortable. We would much rather be contented and so we try to suppress our longings or find ways for them to be met. Many great Christian saints, however, have suggested that our longings are an important part of our spiritual formation. Consider the following quotations:

Desiderium sinus cordis -- It is longing that makes the heart deep.

St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 40.10

“The Holy Spirit fills us with longing, and all we can do is seek, suffer, and surrender. Then, when it is God’s will, what we seek is illuminated with perfect clarity, and we find it. This is grace. What pleases God is our continual search, fueled by faith, hope and love. What pleases us is encountering the object of our heart’s deepest desire (God), which fills us with joy.”

The Showings of Julian of Norwich, trans. Mirabai Starr, p. 32.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find until after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.”

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 121

Sit with these quotes for a few moments. Notice your reactions. What stands out to you?

Advent is all about longing -- that deep desire for Christ to come and set all things right, to make all things new. In Advent, we are reminded that our sense of dissatisfaction with the world is a right one, and that wonder of all wonders, God has heard our yearning hearts and is working his redemption even now.

What might it look like to view our longing as a grace that moves us further into the heart of God?

BRINGING OUR LONGINGS TO GOD

Contemplative Prayer

Adele Calhoun describes the aim of Contemplative Prayer “to develop an open receptivity to the Trinity that enables me to always be with God just as I am.” During seasons when our awareness of longing is heightened, contemplative prayer can be a powerful way to bring all of ourselves and our desires to God.

Consider this thought from contemplative and spiritual director Father Jacques Philippe:

“...many people are distressed because they are not contemplatives. They do not take the time to nourish their own hearts and return them to peace by gazing with love on Jesus. In order to resist fear and discouragement, it is necessary that through prayer--through a personal experience of God re-encountered, recognized and loved in prayer--we taste and see how good the Lord is (Psalm 34). ... One can never insist enough on the necessity of quiet, meditative prayer--the real source of interior peace. How can one abandon oneself to God and have confidence in Him if one only knows Him from a distance, by hearsay? I had heard of You by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen You (Job 42:5). The heart does not awaken to confidence until it awakens to love; we need to feel the gentleness and the tenderness of the Heart of Jesus. This cannot be obtained except by the habit of meditative prayer, by this tender repose in God which is contemplative.”

Searching for and Maintaining Peace: A Small Treatise on Peace of Heart, Father Jacques Philippe, pp. 34-35.

Spend some time now with God, bringing to him all of the longing and desires for yourself, for your loved ones, for the world, whatever these longings might look or feel like to you. God knows your heart and, as Julian of Norwich reminds us, is delighted when we bring our longings to him.

Perhaps use these verses to guide and inspire your prayers:

“Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God.”

(Romans 8:26-27, The Message)

“And when you come before God, don’t turn that into a theatrical production either. All these people making a regular show out of their prayers, hoping for stardom! Do you think God sits in a box seat? Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

(Matthew 6:5-6, The Message)

Intercessory Prayer

Prayers of Intercession can also help channel our longings towards the only One who can finally fulfill them. It may seem obvious, but often when we get stuck in the longing itself, we forget that God wants to hear our prayers, and even when we have been in the habit of praying, it is easy to get discouraged or to lose heart.

In Luke 21 when Jesus described to his friends what the end of the age will look like, and the fear and terror that will come over the earth in response to it all, he gave very simple instructions:

“When these things begin to take place, **stand up and lift up your heads**, because your redemption is drawing near.” (21:28)

“Be always on the watch” (21:36)

...and...

“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down,” or put another way in *The Message*: “Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled.” (21:34)

Stand up, lift up your heads, be on the watch, don’t let your expectations get dulled -- in short, keep those longings for Christ’s advent going by keeping your sights set on Him. In Intercessory Prayer we turn those “concerns and worries into prayer and enter God’s heart for the world as we pray from there.”¹

The reality is that this kind of intercession is not simple in a broken world. But the great news is that God knows this. Richard Foster describes this reality beautifully in his book on prayer. He writes:

“When we begin praying... we soon discover that it is easy to become discouraged at the results, which seem frustratingly slow and uneven. This is because we are entering the strange mix of divine influence and human autonomy. ... This process is hard for us to

¹ Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 231.

accept, and we can easily become disheartened by it. I think Jesus understood this, and, as a result, he gave more than one teaching on our need for persistence -- what we today call the parables of importunity. He even specifies his reason for telling these stories, namely, that we would ‘pray always and not...lose heart.’” (See Luke 18:1-8 and Luke 11:5-13 for two such parables.)²

Foster later quotes John Calvin’s exhortation towards this kind of persistent supplication: “We must repeat the same supplications not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need, a hundred and a thousand times...We must never be weary in waiting for God’s help.”³

What is your experience of intercessory prayer? Can you take some time now to allow your longings and concerns for the world to be turned into intercessions? Try to be honest with God about whatever is on your heart and in your mind as you pray.

O EMMANUEL

Malcolm Guite

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us,
O long-sought with-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness,
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

² Richard Foster, *Prayer*, p. 196.

³ Foster, *Prayer*, p. 197, quoting Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 683.

THE MOVEMENT OF JOY

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

Madeleine L'Engle, "After Annunciation"

The Season of Advent is a season of great joy. Even as we wait for Christ's second coming, we wait with great hope as we celebrate his first Advent and the miracle it contains that God loves us and is rescuing us in order to bring us into new life in him.

At times, joy comes easily. At other times, joy comes as we choose to "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8) Which means that at times, joy wells up readily, and other times, the pump needs a little priming. Wherever you find yourself today, consider practicing the following disciplines as aides in the movement of Advent joy.

PRACTICES OF JOY

Celebration

The discipline of celebration focuses our hearts, minds, and actions, on the goodness of God as we enjoy "those things that bring us great gladness and revel in them before the Lord."⁴

Isaac of Stella, a 12th century monk, prayed this prayer for his followers, that they would know God's goodness in a transformative way:

"May the Son of God who is already formed in you grow in you--so that for you he will become immeasurable, and that in you he will become laughter, exultation, the fullness of joy which no one can take from you."

⁴ Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 26.

Paul encouraged the Philippians to focus their minds on God's goodness in this way:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (Philippians 4:8)

The discipline of celebration is about not only thinking of such things, but practicing them as well. Clearly, this can and should extend beyond this day of silent retreat, but as a beginning, here are some suggestions for ways to celebrate even now.⁵

- * Write a poem or a song of celebration to God. Consider these psalms of praise to stimulate your creativity--Psalm 100, 117, 136, 145
- * If you have markers, colored pencils or other art materials with you, allow yourself to playfully express your thoughts and feelings to God through the medium of art.
- * Take a walk and notice the intricacies of nature. Allow yourself to delight in the wonder of God's creation.
- * Spend some time in the sanctuary, attending to the cross, the windows, the architecture. Enjoy the stillness and the beauty around you.
- * Read Zephaniah 3:17 and reflect on how God celebrates you. Ask for the grace to view yourself as God sees you.
- * Ask the Lord to bring to mind the places, people, and practices that bring you most joy. How might you more intentionally engage with these in your daily life as you go from here?

⁵ Some of these are adapted from Adele Calhoun's, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*.

Discipline of Gratitude

Our lectionary reading for today, the first day of Advent, is from Luke 21:25ff wherein Jesus describes the end of the age before he comes again. In this passage Jesus warns his friends of how easy it is for our hearts to be weighed down with the anxieties of life. Here is where the discipline of gratitude is especially helpful. Without denying the difficulties of this life, we are invited to bring to mind the many good gifts of our gracious God, and to receive them as signs of his love and care.

Madeleine L'Engle reflected on the paradox of this kind of grateful heart stance in this poem:

Without any rhyme
without any reason
my heart lifts to light
in this bleak season

Believer and wanderer
caught by salvation
stumbler and blunderer
into Creation

In this cold blight
where marrow is frozen
it is God's time
my heart has chosen

In paradox and story
parable and laughter
find I the glory
here in hereafter

Madeleine L'Engle, "The Glory"

In the quiet of this moment, ask God to help you take stock of where you are today. Are you feeling weighed down? Or is your heart full of his goodness?

When James wrote to dispersed Christians embroiled in trials of all manner, one of his first exhortations is this:

“Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. **Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights**, who does not change like shifting shadows.”
(James 1:16-17, emphasis added)

Emboldened to see all good gifts as coming straight from the Father’s hand, we practice the discipline of gratitude. There are many forms this can take. Consider any of the following for your time today:

- * Ask God to take you back through the past week and to show you some of his blessings woven throughout the week.
- * Begin a gratitude list. Ask the Lord to bring to mind both ‘big and small’ things he has given you.
- * Who are the people for whom you are most grateful? What are ways that you can thank God for their role in your life. Perhaps write a letter of gratitude to someone now.
- * What is an area of your life in which you have a particularly hard time being grateful? Bring this to God and ask God to show you his presence with you in the midst of this situation. Ask God if there are places within this where you can be grateful. Be careful not to resort to stoic resignation, but open yourself to what God might have to say here.

JOURNALING
