

Catholic

UPDATE

© 2018 LIGUORI
PUBLICATIONS,
A REDEMPTORIST
MINISTRY.

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE
LIGUORI, MO
63057-9999

800-325-9521
LIGUORI.ORG

PHOTOCOPYING
PROHIBITED.

C1811A

NOVEMBER 2018

Celebrating Advent

GOD IS WITH US ALREADY...
AND NOT YET.

This collection of reflections is based on the classic Advent formula of "Already, Not Yet." Each day of the season aims to provide a starting point for reflecting on how our faith is already handed to us but not yet perfectly lived.

FR. DANIEL P. HORAN, OFM

★ First Week of Advent

Sunday: *A Prophet's Challenge* (ISAIAH 2:4)

Some of life's patterns are comforting and assuring, like the rising and setting of the sun, while others can be disconcerting, like a powerful storm. The latter explains this passage from Isaiah in reference to some of the disturbing things we regularly witness in life. Isaiah challenges us to imagine an end to violence and division; to consider working toward a more perfect world. It's a reminder of the fulfilled promise we anticipate during Advent and celebrate at Christmas, when God entered the world as one of us to show us that what we imagine is possible.

Monday: *New Beginnings* (MATTHEW 8:8)

The centurion in Matthew 8 is a kindred spirit with those who have stopped going to Mass or participating in the sacramental life of the Church because they feel unworthy to do so. He rejects Jesus, in practice if not by intention, to save Jesus the trouble of rejecting him. In response, Jesus assures him that nothing, not even his own sense of limit- edness and sin, can separate him from God's grace. Advent is a perfect time for new beginnings—a time of preparation, renewal, and celebrating the reality that no one is worthy to receive God's gifts, particularly God's gift of self at Christmas. The only barrier we face in inviting Jesus into our lives is our own fear or shame that keeps us from extending the invitation.

Tuesday: *With Open Eyes* (LUKE 10:23–24)

Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke's Gospel affirm that many experience doubt or are unable to recognize God is at work before them. Their eyes are blessed because they see what has long been expected. Still, even the disciples deny, betray, and abandon Jesus.

In Advent we await the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation for the whole world. Pray for the courage to see with open eyes the faith tradition that has been handed down. Christ remains present in our midst. How can we overcome our fear and doubt so we recognize *Emmanuel*, God with us?

Wednesday: Be More Like Jesus (MATTHEW 15:32)

When we change the subject in a difficult conversation, intentionally ignore a homeless beggar, or disregard the pain or suffering of another person as not our problem, we lack the pity that moved Jesus to feed the hungry crowds. Pity—though perhaps not the best descriptor of Christ’s heartfelt sympathy—helps us better understand Jesus’ actions. Jesus, fully divine and fully human, lives up to the divine relationship by maintaining a concern for the lived realities of all people. May this Advent be a time for us to strive to be more like Christ in every encounter we have and with every person we meet.

Thursday: Embracing Patience (JAMES 5:8)

If you struggle with being patient, your prayers can feel rushed or demanding, your thoughts unwilling to focus on God, and your ears unwilling to open and hear the Spirit.

To heed the admonition of James and patiently await the Prince of Peace is to embrace a countercultural stance. It requires us to stand up to the hustle and bustle by deliberately dropping out of the fray. Doing so helps us prepare our hearts and ready our lives for the Savior. This Advent, may we focus on what’s most important in life and adopt the freedom of God’s grace in our busy, impatient world.

Friday: Unpacking Obstacles (LUKE 18:11)

Pope Francis invites us to consider how we prevent the Spirit’s action in our hearts and lives. The first obstacle he unpacks is “empty words.” We close ourselves off to genuine conversion when we offer empty words but neglect the least among us (Matthew 25).

“Words that justify” relate to the second hidden obstacle. By making excuses and self-satisfying reasons for not fully investing in the life of Christian discipleship, we foreclose the possibility of God inviting us to a deeper commitment.

The third obstacle is “accusatory words.” We blame others in order to justify the status quo or evade an examination of our consciences. What can we do this Advent to unpack our personal obstacles that we may ignore but still need to overcome?

Saturday: Giving Freely (MATTHEW 10:8)

Our modern, consumer-driven culture suggests that everything has a price. Yet, God’s gift of love and life is absolutely free. Perhaps we convince ourselves that there’s more that we must pay to obtain such a gift because we’re wary of accepting the responsibility that comes with it. Jesus says: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you” (John 15:12). We’re often willing to love one another, but we tend to qualify and quantify our love. The greatest sign of God’s overflowing generosity and love is what we’re preparing to celebrate. How can we more generously share the gift we have freely received—God’s love?

★ Second Week of Advent

Sunday: Faith vs. Certainty (MATTHEW 3:1–2)

As the final forerunner to announcing God’s reign, John the Baptist plays an important role in the history of salvation. Yet, while in prison, John’s certainty about Jesus wavers. He sends some of his own disciples to question if Jesus is the Mes-

siah. Perhaps we can relate to what it’s like to be enveloped in anxiety and uncertainty about the mission God has called us to fulfill. But John the Baptist models for us a way to fulfill God’s call to be prophets of justice, peace, and the coming of the Lord, even while struggling with the always-elusive certitude that comes with faith.

Monday: Choosing God’s Path (ISAIAH 2:3)

In the popular children’s series *Choose Your Own Adventure*, the author cleverly places a literary fork in the road, inviting the reader to choose between two paths in the narrative. Readers unhappy with the ending can go back and select an alternate. In life, while we get to choose our own adventures, we don’t often get to go back. Isaiah exhorts us to select a particular path—that of the Lord, to pursue God’s will in lieu of our own whimsical fancy. Although the journey of discipleship will be daunting and difficult at times, we’re never alone. This Advent, recommit to the right adventure.

Tuesday: Accepting God’s Justice (JEREMIAH 23:6)

The New Testament offers plenty of examples of those who decide to walk away from Jesus and disregard an invitation to conversion and discipleship, but we never read about an encounter in which Jesus rejects someone. Even though Jesus welcomes sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes—rejecting no one—we often do precisely the opposite. Our rejection is frequently masked in an effort to exercise “justice,” but God’s justice mimics Jesus’ encounters. God’s justice is what the world awaits but doesn’t accept when it appears. God’s justice demands that we open our hearts to conversion and refute rejection. Make this Advent season an opportunity to work on acting more in accord with God’s justice.

Wednesday: Unveiling His Presence (ISAIAH 7:14)

The Church teaches that Christ is made present during the Mass in four ways: in the assembly gathered in his name, in the priest, in the proclamation of the Scriptures, “but especially under the Eucharistic species” of bread and wine (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*], 7). Of course, the Eucharist is the highest of these—“the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324). But we should ask ourselves: how well do we recognize the presence of Christ in all of these ways? May we take this time to prepare ourselves to be more aware of Christ’s presence as Emmanuel in all the ways he comes to us.

Thursday: Seeing God with Us (JEREMIAH 29:13–14)

Although the notion that God is reflected in and communicated through the world around us is as old as the Bible itself, it’s a succinct idea to think about during Advent. Jeremiah addresses those in exile who feel estranged from their heritage and God. It can be especially challenging to see God in all things when times are difficult. But as with the people of Israel, God assures us of divine imminence. In truth, God is already before us! Open your heart to see. The challenge is that we don’t primarily seek God alone, but as a community of faith. Through our love, mercy, and kindness, we’re asked to help reveal to others the real nearness of God.

Friday: *The Gratitude Attitude* (PHILIPPIANS 4:4-5)

It's nearly impossible to be generous or kind without a grateful disposition. If we harbor jealous desires, constantly compare ourselves to others, or foster bitterness, then we forestall the possibility of gratitude for what we have and who we are. The "reason for the season," the coming of Christ into the world, is a cause for rejoicing and therefore a reason for gratitude. Do we rejoice in the gift of the Incarnation, allowing it to be a source for gratitude? Or do we succumb to the stress and tension of an increasingly commercialized season? Strive to be more generous and patient, and reconcile broken relationships.

Saturday: *Comforting, Intriguing* (ISAIAH 61:11)

There is something both comfortingly predictive and yet intriguingly surprising about the way that plants grow, live, and flourish. Similarly, God is predictable in the way he freely gives divine love, mercy, and grace to us. But God is also surprising. God doesn't follow human standards or logic. Whereas we judge one another harshly and often find ourselves in a cycle of negativity, Isaiah reminds us that God's justice and mercy will prevail, and in lieu of demoralizing criticism, God causes praise to spring up. This Advent, let's open our hearts to receive the good news of God, who is predictable and surprising in the best ways possible.

★ Third Week of Advent

Sunday: *Rejoicing in God* (LUKE 1:46-47)

The Christmas story begins under the shadow of some unexpected and seemingly unpleasant circumstances. Fear, anger, and a loss for words would be understandable responses from a young woman in a situation similar to that of Mary of Nazareth. But Mary does something unexpected: she "rejoices in God!" Mary—full of grace—says yes to God. In her prayer, the Magnificat (song of praise), Mary shows us the reasons to follow in her footsteps. May we reflect with Mary in her famous song of praise to God for the gift of the Incarnation and, through her intercession, may we also ready ourselves to celebrate Christ's coming!

Monday: *Responding with Grace* (LUKE 1:48)

The Greek word used in Luke's Gospel for what is often translated as lowly (*tapeinos*) has less to do with humiliation than humiliation. God finds favor with Mary's humiliation, or how she responds to her lowly state: a teenage mother betrothed to a man who is not the father of her child. Mary's prayerful perspective allows her to see that God's grace is already present in and around her and in the world—a realization that leads to discovery more than acquiring favor. May we follow Mary's example and learn how to respond full of grace to the various circumstances we encounter, even those we unfortunately find humiliating.

Tuesday: *Peace Amid Chaos* (PSALM 46:5)

Despite the Christian call to be actively waiting, our society lives out the lyrics of the classic song "Silver Bells" with plenty of "city sidewalks, busy sidewalks" during Advent. It can be hard to recognize the peace that the world can't give (see John 14:27) when our schedules and minds are filled with

obligations and stress. Psalm 46 (in the *New Revised Standard Version*) reminds us God is "in the midst of the city." This Advent, let's be more attentive to the presence of God around us, especially when it seems God is distant or we're distracted. We also may find solace in the closing line of "Silver Bells" that "soon it will be Christmas Day."

Wednesday: *Wake-up Time* (ROMANS 13:11)

The symbol of sleep seems appropriate when considering our faith during Advent. Rather than avoid the challenges of Christian living, like people who are drawn to crawl back into bed on a cold and rainy morning, we're encouraged to trust in what has been revealed to us. Like the Romans, we're closer to the day of salvation than we were at first acceptance of the faith, but it's still the time of "not yet." We have to decide whether we'll wake from sleep and live the gospel or pull the covers back up and return to slumber. As Christmas draws near, let this be our time to wake up.

Thursday: *Staying by God* (EZEKIEL 34:16)

How often do we reflect on the immensity of God's love for us? Have you ever had a child in your care go missing or been told a loved one was injured? Such a parallel can help us appreciate God's love that already exists for us. In the message Ezekiel relays to God, we're the lost and hidden children who have escaped from sight, when all God wants is for us to be close and safe, for us to return his love, and be shepherded rightly instead of following our selfish desires. This Advent, may we recognize the love God already has for us as we await the complete fulfillment of salvation yet to come.

Friday: *Bookends of a Divine Act* (ISAIAH 12:2)

Many confuse redemption with salvation. Think of salvation as the other side of a singular coin that represents God's divine will to create and save. To us, God's act of creation seems distinct from God's desire for all to be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:4). However, for God, creation and salvation are two bookends of the same divine act. As the advent of our Savior approaches, may we join Isaiah in giving thanks that "God indeed is our salvation...." God created everything out of love, so also God loves everything back to God's own self in Christ.

Saturday: *Be Still, Know* (PSALM 46:10)

In today's hectic world, it has become harder to carve out moments of time where we're simply still. We're told to hurry and rush, get from one activity to the next. The truth is, we can't know God unless we're still and we make God a priority. Saint Augustine is credited with saying that "God is the one who is closer to us than we are to ourselves," a comforting fact. What is discomfiting is the reality that often we're oblivious to God's presence because we're neither still nor quiet in mind or body. May we prioritize stillness, silence, and time alone with God in order to recognize and get to know Emmanuel, God who is always with us.

Fr. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, a Franciscan friar of Holy Name Province (NY), is an author and assistant professor of systematic theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His books include the award-winning *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*. He has written scores of popular and scholarly articles and is a coeditor of *New Theology Review*.

★ Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday: *Reflecting on Surrender* (PHILIPPIANS 2:6)

The feeling of being in control plays a major role in our experience of satisfaction or discontent, of joy or sadness. In Philippians, Paul reminds us how God surrendered absolute control of divinity to become vulnerable and enter into our messy world as one of us. To celebrate God as Emmanuel, God with us, is a radical pronouncement of God's love for us and a letting go of control, which is required to risk profound love. As we celebrate the "already, not yet" of Christ's total surrender of control for us, may we reflect on where we stand in our baptismal vow to follow the humility of God.

Monday: *Examining Conscience* (1 CORINTHIANS 4:5)

Like the Corinthians, we might use our time to degrade or judge others, often with the unconscious aim of making ourselves feel or look superior. The penitential act during the celebration of the Eucharist, when we "prepare to celebrate these mysteries" by acknowledging our sinfulness, makes many uncomfortable. However, it is a ritual deserving of exaltation because it's the communal embodiment of the truth Paul addresses here: We're all imperfect sinners, so we need repentance and reconciliation. May this Advent be a time when we examine our consciences and acknowledge our failings so we can celebrate as a community the great gift of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Tuesday: *United in Baptism, Faith* (JEREMIAH 30:22)

Many wouldn't immediately identify God as the one to whom they belong. Rather, nationality, religious tradition, ethnic heritage, and racial identity—among other categories and characteristics—might come to mind. But at the core of our faith tradition, we, as Christians, profess that we belong to God. Sisters and brothers in Christ, sons and daughters of God, are united in our shared baptism and faith. Often we let other identity markers and differences—real and perceived—get in the way of our communion. As we prepare to celebrate the coming of our brother Jesus Christ this Advent, may we be more mindful of the relationships we have as children of God and sisters and brothers to one another.

Wednesday: *Our Place in Creation* (JOB 12:7)

We often presume God only cares about people. To be sure, Christian tradition tells us we're the only creatures made in God's image and likeness. But the same tradition also tells us we're one part of a diverse community and that we've been given the responsibility to care for all creation. During these days of anticipation, may we step back and see with new eyes our true place within the family of creation. Consider how other creatures, which often do a better job of caring for one another and us than we do for them, can help teach us how to improve our relationships within this cosmic community. The significance of the Incarnation, of God entering into creation as one of us, is cause for the entirety of creation to rejoice.

Thursday: *The Wonder and Glory* (PSALM 139:13)

The Bible offers imagery of the origin of life used by prophets and psalmists to illustrate the intimacy of God's relationship with us. Like life and birth, the mystery of God's closeness, knowledge, and love for us can leave us in a place of awe and wonder.

Let's take the occasion of the coming birth of our Lord as an opportunity to join our voices with the psalmist and open our eyes to the wonder and glory of our very being. Indeed, God not only formed us, but God loved us into existence. May our prayer and outlook be moved to gratitude and awe at this mystery in our lives and in the lives of all we meet.

Friday: *God's Choice* (PHILIPPIANS 2:8)

Whereas God could have remained in a state of absolute omnipotence, unaffected by change or finality, we profess that, in the Incarnation, God chose to become humble and enter into solidarity with us. Inevitably, that meant dying. The control that God gave up is what many spend their lives seeking. We're discontented from the reality of our existence and seek to be more than, or other than, the person God created. This is partially motivated by our fear of death. As we celebrate the "already, not yet" of Christ's coming, we're reminded that death is a natural part of the life God shared with us. May we strive to be more comfortable with who we are, even accepting our eventual death, just as Christ did.

Saturday: *God's Caring Nature* (ISAIAH 66:13)

The Scripture passage conveys a glorious image for God—a mother comforting her child! Though we may never fully understand God, we're always in relationship with God. Through the prophet Isaiah, God expresses a tender truth that he loves and cares for us like a doting mother. While there are certainly bad or absent mothers, just as there are bad or absent fathers, God's ability to care about and for us exceeds even the best of human parents. As we approach Christmas, remember that unconditional love led to God entering the world as one of us to be in relationship with us through Christ Jesus (John 3:16).

December 25: *The Gift* (JOHN 1:18)

In this Bible verse, John attempts to describe the significance of the Incarnation and what follows during the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Before the Incarnation, the only way people knew about God was through Scripture and creation, those filtered, partial ways of knowing the Creator (Hebrews 1:1). But with the birth of Christ, God actually enters into our world, in flesh, as one of us and is now fully human among humanity. God shows us what it means for us to live as God intended. May we be inspired to look to Christ in the Gospels on this Christmas Day and every day. May our relationship with God deepen in response to the gracious gift God has graciously given to us—God's very self!

IMPRIMATUR: MOST REVEREND MARK S. RIVITUSO, AUXILIARY BISHOP, ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS, September 11, 2018.

Permission to publish is an indication that nothing contrary to Church teaching is contained in this work.

It does not imply any endorsement of the opinions expressed in the publication; nor is any liability assumed by this permission.

Scripture texts in this work are from *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC