

Introduction

“A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices...”

Often when we think of a “weary world,” we realize how much it describes our world today: fractured relationships, disappointments, worry, illness, grief, hunger and homelessness, violence, international conflict and war, political and interracial unrest.

Yet this line—“a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices”—from our much-loved Christmas hymn “O Holy Night,” describes the world of Jesus’ time as well as our time too.

In our journey to wholeness—to holiness—we as a human family are always struggling with our imperfections, our selfishness, and our need to be first, powerful, and in control. Yet, in the midst of that, there are always thrills of hope—hope because God lives within our midst, hope because many, many people respond to the call to be hope-filled, caring people for others.

When asked why he called the Second Vatican Council, Pope St. John XXIII replied, “To make the human sojourn a little less sad.” He knew that it was the role of the church, the role of Jesus’ disciples, to walk with others in heartfelt hope and compassionate caring, especially amid the challenges of life.

“A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.” In a troubled, imperfect world, our Advent-Christmas season reminds us that we have reasons to be grateful and rejoice—because of the One who brings us hope by becoming one of us, intimately walking our journey with us.

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The main thing

“When these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads...” LUKE 21:28

A proverb states: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Perhaps that is one reason the church invites us each year to a celebration of Advent.

The readings of Advent, especially the Sunday Scriptures, call us to the main thing: to be fully awake, to be unfalteringly aware of whose we are, to be persistently prepared to incessantly recognize God in our midst.

Today’s Scripture proclaims, “when these signs begin to happen...” In reality, we have signs all around us—signs of God’s presence. The Incarnation—God being with us—happens here and now, all the time. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI reminded us: “Advent invites us to pause in silence to understand a presence. It is an invitation to understand that the individual events of the day are hints that God is giving us, signs of the attention he has for each one of us.”

DAILY PRACTICE: Each Advent day, write down one instance of this main thing in your life: how God was present with you that day.

ADVENT PRAYER: God-With-Us, in the midst of busy days, the main thing anchors and guides us. Slow me down; make me alert and grateful for the countless ways you are present, always giving me signs of attention.

Bringing good news

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!

ROMANS 10:15

In a serious accident, a man lost his legs, one arm, and two fingers on his other hand. Gradually coping with these difficulties, he felt called to write letters to local prisoners. Holding a pen with his remaining fingers, he struggled to write weekly, but no response came. After a year, he received a grateful letter from the warden, requesting, “Could you write future letters on the sturdiest paper you can find? Your letters are eagerly passed from one prisoner to another. Your words—your good news—bring them comfort and, at times, challenge. Passing through so many hands, they’re in tatters by the time they reach the last prisoner.”

We, too, are called to bring the good news to others by our lives. Often though, as the letter writer experienced for a year, we never realize the impact of our words and actions.

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news—even when we never know how far it spreads!

DAILY PRACTICE: At the end of the day, think about your words and actions. Was your day filled with bringing good news, bringing care, kindness, and comfort?

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Good News, continue to use me as your instrument, sharing the reality of your unconditional love through my words and deeds.

The peaceable kingdom

Then the wolf will be a guest of the lamb.

ISAIAH 11:6

Many Christmas cards depict this scene from Isaiah. But it's not an actual scene; it's a dream, a vision, an imagining. Have you ever seen leopards and baby goats lying down together? When have you observed wolves and lambs enjoying each other's company? How often have you noticed bears and cows eating side by side?

Reality is somewhat different. So often in the real world, each side is afraid to trust the other when they are invited to the table of peace. Each side is afraid they are going to be eaten alive.

This reality can occur not just in far-off places, but in families, friendships, neighborhoods, workplaces, even parishes and the church. Isaiah reminded the people that they were called to give themselves permission to dream of peace, permission to hope for a better time. Hope, of course, is not wishing; it is not complacent. It empowers us to take the first step toward a peaceful, nobler time. If we dream it, we can achieve it.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place a picture of the peaceable kingdom on your dinner table. Imagine (then take a step toward) peace: forgive; let go of presumptions; see the other with understanding eyes.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Peace, enlarge my dreams so that they are your visions of peace. Guide my actions so that they bring the peaceable kingdom.

God who provides

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples...

ISAIAH 25:6

One Christmas season, I asked my niece Michelle if she had written to Santa. She said no, she wasn't going to write to him that year. Fearing that her older brother had said something, I asked, "Don't you believe in Santa?" Michelle replied, "Oh, yes. He's always good to me." When I inquired why, then, she wasn't going to write to him, she replied, "Because if I write and tell him all the things I want, I'll never know what he just wanted to give me."

This could be, at times, a commentary on our lives with God. Isaiah—and much of Scripture—reminds us that God provides more lavishly and lovingly than we can ever imagine. Sometimes we find ourselves making lists of all that we need from God, rather than noticing and appreciating all that we have already been given.

DAILY PRACTICE: In this season of making lists of our wants, refrain from doing that with God today. Rather than prayers of petition, pray prayers of praise and thanks (and/or prayers of petition in the context of gratitude and trust in God's care).

ADVENT PRAYER: Providing God, you care for me abundantly, generously, and delightfully. Thank you for your ordinary and extraordinary gifts each day.

The power of trust

Trust in the LORD forever! For the LORD is an eternal Rock. He humbles those in high places, and the lofty city he brings down...

ISAIAH 26:4-5

After a severe car accident, a woman lay in the street, in need of medical assistance. As a young woman bent over the injured woman, a man rushed over. “Move away, please,” he told the woman. “I’ve had CPR training. I’ll handle this.” He pulled out his CPR manual and started flipping through it. After a few moments, the woman he had pushed out of the way tapped his shoulder and said, “When you get to the part about calling a doctor, I’m already here.”

The man wanted to be helpful. Yet did his eagerness blind him, enabling him to imagine that he had all the answers, trusting only in himself? As members of an interrelated family—as daughters and sons of a providing God—do we always remember that others, and certainly God, might already be here? Are all of our actions, hopes, and desires rooted in trusting God always and everywhere?

DAILY PRACTICE: During prayer today, reflect on an area of your life where trusting in God might bring deeper peace as well as the ability to reach out.

ADVENT PRAYER: God, our Eternal Rock, deepen my trust in your steadfast presence. Because you are my Rock, enable me to serve others, trusting in your strength.

Notice the blessings

The lowly will ever find joy in the LORD, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

ISAIAH 29:19

Today's gospel tells the story of two men who had their eyesight restored; the first reading reminds us that the needy are closely connected to our loving God.

Practical wisdom might tell us that when we are ill, suffering, or disadvantaged, we're so immersed in that reality that gratitude would be the last feeling or action in our lives. Yet for many—those who are followers of Jesus—the opposite has been true: a touch of adversity has inspired them to recognize the good, the blessings, in every moment. Simple pleasures, the small surprises, and the presence of extraordinary people do abound in our lives—if we have eyes to see. Mary Beth Sammons, in *Living Life as a Thank You*, mentions that her dad called this “finding a little Christmas in every day.”

DAILY PRACTICE: Within this Advent-Christmas season—a season of joy—sometimes sufferings and worries stand out more boldly. As you encounter a difficulty or challenge, look for the blessings and gifts that surround you.

ADVENT PRAYER: Ever-present Holy One, in the midst of little or large troubles, your care is never-ending, bringing all good things. Encourage me to recognize with gratitude the simple but remarkable blessings hidden within each day.

Prayer and acting

At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them.

MATTHEW 9:36

One evening while friends of mine were praying before dinner, nine-year-old Joshua interrupted his family, saying, "I think we're praying all wrong." His dad asked what he meant; and Joshua replied, "We're praying for the poor people so they have enough food; we're praying that Mrs. Carson will not be lonely because her husband died. Maybe we should be praying that God will remind us to share some of our food and work at the soup kitchen. Maybe we should be praying that God will nudge us to invite Mrs. Carson for dinner with us sometimes."

There is a proverb that says, "Prayer without action is like drawing water with a woven basket." Just as Jesus was moved in today's gospel, prayer moves our hearts not just with feelings but into practical deeds for others, concrete actions for those intentions for which we are praying.

DAILY PRACTICE: Listen to your prayers. Are they giving God good advice on how to run the world? Are they reminding you to live your prayer?

ADVENT PRAYER: Caring God of Action, urge us to be like you. Challenge us to pray so compassionately that our words, with your strength, move us to be your ears and hands in our world. Give us the grace to work for what we pray for.

Created as interdependent

The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

LUKE 3:5-6

In 1971, Ed Mitchell returned from his Apollo 14 mission to the moon a changed man. From his experience in the cosmos, he said, he gained a greater awareness of the forces that shape the universe. His website states: "As he hurtled earthward through the abyss between the two worlds, Mitchell became engulfed by... 'a sense of universal connectedness.' He intuitively sensed that his presence, that of his fellow astronauts, and that of the planet in the window were all part of a deliberate, universal process.... The experience was so overwhelming Mitchell knew his life would never be the same."

The ending of today's gospel about preparedness reminds us of this connectedness: all flesh and all creation shall be transformed; no one and no thing is excluded. When we live an Advent of deepening connection with God, creation, and all humanity, our lives will never be the same.

DAILY PRACTICE: Watch the night sky; watch the people you pass today; watch the people on the news. As you do all this, reflect on your connection with everyone and all creation.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of the Universe, you created us dependent on you and interdependent with each other and creation. Intensify my awe so that my dreams, my focus, and my actions are forever changed.

Attentive to others

They...lowered him on the stretcher through the tiles. LUKE 5:19

When my great-nephew Tyler was about four, whenever we were in the car and another car passed us, he loved to ask, “Who’s in that car? Where are they going? What are they going to do?”

“Let’s imagine where they might be going today,” I’d say in reply. Often we would pray for them and their activities of the day.

Even more than by his curiosity, I was struck by Tyler’s interest in and concern for others. The men in today’s gospel were concerned about their friend—and rightly so! But Tyler’s concern was expansive; he was interested in people he didn’t know and probably would never meet. The friends in the gospel went to great lengths to care for another. Tyler was attentive to the needs and interests of others.

Advent calls us beyond ourselves. Amid our full schedules during these days, what is most important? The decorations, the shopping, the parties, or the lives of people—their joys and sorrows, their courage and fears, their achievements and disappointments?

DAILY PRACTICE: Imagine the concerns and needs of someone who passes through your life today. What might you do to support, comfort, assist, or encourage them?

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Loving Attention, your response to us is constant and all-embracing. Deepen in me your loving attentiveness to the needs of others, even before they ask.

Filled with grace

“The Lord is with you.” LUKE 1:28

Today—a feast to celebrate! In some countries (Italy, Venezuela, Argentina, and Portugal, for example), it is a public holiday. For us, it is also the patronal feast of the United States.

This day celebrates the belief that Mary was uniquely blessed from the very beginning with the gift of grace. One German phrase names today “the feast of the be-gracing of Mary.”

Often we explain this belief by saying that Mary was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception. Very true; a positive wording would be that Mary was filled with grace, immersed always in the love of God.

Mary lived her daily life—the joyful small moments as well as the larger challenges—in and with grace, continually aware of the presence of God, always and everywhere. This is one of the outstanding ways Mary is our model and our companion.

DAILY PRACTICE: Grace is a relationship, not a thing. Grace-filled times aren’t only in church; they’re everywhere. Be aware today of the wonder, the gift of Grace.

ADVENT PRAYER: Gracious God, why do I think I have to ask you to come and be present? Why do I think I have to find you and put you in my life? You are already here! Help me to slow down and be more aware!

All are significant

He...numbers them, calling them all by name. **ISAIAH 40:26**

A professor gave a pop quiz to her nursing school students. The last question asked, “What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?” Most students assumed this was a joke or trick question. They certainly had seen the cleaning woman several times. They knew she was tall, dark-haired, and probably in her 50s, but how or why would they ever know her name? Many of the students left the question blank; a few ventured a guess. As the students were leaving class, one asked if that last question would count toward the quiz grade. “Absolutely,” said the professor. “In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello, calling them by name.”

Countless passages in Scripture remind us that God calls us each by name. The Advent-Christmas season celebrates the comforting but challenging reality that Jesus came among us because of every one of us; to God, everyone is significant.

DAILY PRACTICE: Is there someone you see often, perhaps a public servant or worker with whom you have casual contact? Learn their name and call them by it.

ADVENT PRAYER: God who Calls Us by Name, teach us to cherish the significance and to respect the dignity of each of your daughters and sons.

Hearing what might be missed

“Whoever has ears ought to hear.” MATTHEW 11:15

Winnie the Pooh said, “Don’t underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can’t hear...”

Jesus challenges us in today’s gospel to be attentive to listening, to notice the people and events surrounding us—the people and events that are sacred, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. Recently I overheard a waitress say to a group of diners at another table, “The five of you must enjoy being together. No one has taken out a phone once while you’ve been here.”

The power and capacity of listening rests in being fully present—to the people in our lives, to the yearnings and desires of our spirits, to God within and around us. How many gifts of presence, of wonder, of grace are missed, especially in this rushed Advent season, because we’ve replaced being fully present with distractions, with no time for watching and listening?

DAILY PRACTICE: Enjoy the gift of unexpected present moments rather than immediately filling them with checking e-mails. Commit to not texting or checking voicemail during meals. Choose a Sunday (or Christmas) to “unplug” and enjoy the presence of family and friends.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of the Present, unplug my frenetic spirit. Nudge me to being fully present, watching, listening, and responding to real life.

Open or critical?

“John came neither eating or drinking...The Son of Man came eating and drinking...” MATTHEW 11:18-19

A perceptive person once said, “Those who can, build; those who can’t, criticize.” That person must have met a lot of people like those in today’s gospel—people who found plenty to criticize, whether their target was John the Baptist or Jesus.

Preaching about this gospel in 2013, Pope Francis remarked that some Christians are always discontented with what preachers say: “They prefer a life caged in their precepts, in their compromises, in their revolutionary plans or in their (disembodied) spirituality...These sad Christians do not believe in the Holy Spirit, do not believe in the freedom that comes from preaching...but it is the very freedom that makes the Church grow. Seeing these who are afraid to dance, to cry, afraid of everything, who ask for certainty in all things, I think of these sad Christians, who always criticize the preachers of the Truth, because they are afraid to open the door to the Holy Spirit.”

This season celebrates the coming of the One who preached Truth in words and actions.

DAILY PRACTICE: During prayer, ask: today, how was I open to the Holy Spirit rather than critical?

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Freedom, save me from being a sad Christian. Strengthen me to be listening, open, and affirming.

We are one

I am coming to dwell among you, says the LORD. Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day.. ZECHARIAH 2:14-15

In December 1531, the Blessed Virgin appeared several times to a poor, 57-year-old Aztec Indian convert named Juan Diego. Mary left a stunning portrait of herself on his cloak. This miraculous image has proved to be ageless; today it is kept in the shrine built in her honor, the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

We might think of today as predominantly a feast for the people of Mexico. Yet in 1910 Our Lady of Guadalupe was declared Patroness of Latin America; in 1945 Pope Pius XII declared her to be the Patroness of all the Americas.

Our Lady of Guadalupe witnesses that we are, in every way, one human family, the family of God. Thomas Merton reminded us, "We are already one," and all true spirituality is reminding us of that oneness.

DAILY PRACTICE: Join a celebration of today's feast, if possible with a Hispanic parish in your diocese. Continue to learn about the church's vision of comprehensive immigration reform (e.g., www.justiceforimmigrants.org).

ADVENT PRAYER: God of All Nations, through the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe, may we continue to grow in our awareness of and gratitude for each other as sisters and brothers. May your love, alive in us, empower us to work for peace throughout the world.

Great expectations

Now the people were filled with expectation. **LUKE 3:15**

Years ago I used to go to my sister's home often, especially to be with my nieces and nephew. One Friday evening I arrived after not being there for a few weeks. My five-year-old niece, Katie, said, "You haven't been here in a long time. Every weekend I've wondered if you'd be coming. I've waited and waited."

The power and necessity of waiting, of embracing expectations, is at the heart of Advent. Today's gospel tells us the people were filled with expectations. They eagerly waited.

We have many expectations, in this season and throughout our 24/7/365 days. We expect cars and computers that work, good health, enjoyable and easy days, and people to support us. But Katie's expectations and hopeful waiting flowed from the reality that she and I had a relationship. In the same way, are our deepest expectations rooted in a relationship—the reality that we are called to be friends of God; that God, who lives among us, loves us unconditionally? Does this relationship, then, influence my expectations?

Are my expectations mine or are they God's? Do they affect the bigger world than just my concerns?

DAILY PRACTICE: Spend time today thinking about God's expectations: what might be something you could do to bring them to fruition?

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Expectations, who desires the best for our world, root my expectations in your all-embracing ones.

Enraptured with wonder

One who sees what the Almighty sees, enraptured... NUMBERS 24:16

As Owen, my five-year-old great-nephew, stood with the patio door open, his mom asked him what he was doing. With wonder in his voice, Owen replied, “Oh, the birds. Listen to the birds.” As my niece told me about this, she said, “Until he said it, I didn’t even hear the birds. I was too busy to even notice.”

Even though this season is filled with various additional commitments and preparations, the very nature of Advent beckons us to slow down, to be awake with wonder, noticing the promises and gifts of God. We are invited to see and embrace our lives as God sees—“sees what the Almighty sees, enraptured..”

We prepare during this season to help ourselves be more aware of the gift of Jesus in our lives and world. Will we be aware of Jesus if we fail to recognize the many wonders in life, the ordinary ones and the spectacular ones (for these are ways Jesus comes to us)?

DAILY PRACTICE: Keep a Calendar of Wonder for the next month. Every day, write, draw, or take a photo of a wondrous sign of Jesus’ presence with you. Be alert for some you have missed in the past.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Wonder, keep me awake so that I may notice, that I may be enraptured, that I might see as you see.

Say the word

A people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the LORD... ZEPHANIAH 3:12

The five-year-old son of a friend of mine asked, “In church we pray, ‘only say the word’; what’s the *word*?” A young child’s literalism, of course, misses the meaning of this common idiom and its witness of faith in the gospel story of the centurion who asks Jesus to heal his sick servant.

To be literal ourselves for a moment, what *is* the “word”? What is the word we need to hear?

Today’s first reading speaks of people responding to the name of the Lord; yet their response is to more than a word, to more than a name. It is to a person, to the constant presence of that person, to God in their midst.

Advent dynamically reminds us of the constancy of God in our midst. God became human, concretely illustrating that God is always with us; because of the very reality of the Incarnation, God can never be far way. Because of God’s steadfast presence, God always speaks the word that we need to hear.

DAILY PRACTICE: What is the word you need to hear today? Write it on a slip of paper and slip it into your pocket. Listen for all the ways God says it to you today.

ADVENT PRAYER: Word of God, only say the word. I’m listening.

Peace amid tears

Turn to me and be safe.

ISAIAH 45:22

A four-year-old child lived next-door to an elderly neighbor who was recently widowed. One day the little boy noticed the man on his porch crying. He went to the man, climbed onto his lap, and sat there for a while. Returning home, the mom asked what her son had said to their neighbor. The little boy replied, “Nothing; I just helped him cry.”

All the commercials and ads that surround us during this Christmas season “insist” that this is the happiest time of the year. Yet for many people the difficulties and challenges of life remain: the death of a loved one, grief because of a miscarriage, unemployment, worry for a family member or friend, the recent diagnosis of a serious illness, the rupture of a relationship, and more.

“Turn to me and be safe,” God says in today’s first reading. This—along with Jesus’ description of his work in the gospel (“the poor have the good news proclaimed to them”) reminds us that God walks with us in the disconsolate realities of life.

DAILY PRACTICE: Incarnation—God becoming human—reminds us that we are called to act like God. Even amid your worries and burdens, how can you be with another, helping them “to cry” today?

ADVENT PRAYER: Silent Listener, Consoling Presence, surround me with your peace. Help me to be your compassion to others.

One family

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ...

MATTHEW 1:1

It would seem that the author of Matthew's gospel never took a writing course, never learned how important first paragraphs are and how appealing they need to be to entice the reader.

We often find ourselves skipping this beginning of the gospel, moving ahead to what we perceive as the real story. In reality, there are many reasons why Jesus' genealogy was important for that time, and why it still has practical implications for us.

As we read the list, these seem to be just names. Some we know a little from Scripture; others we know nothing about. Yet they were all real people, women and men like us, with their frailties and gifts. Within our lives today, how many people do we pass on a daily basis, how many people do we hear about on the news? We may not know them, but in reality, do we say (and respond to them in some way), "I don't know you, but you are part of God's family; frail or strong, you belong to God and to me, for we are all together in God's family"?

DAILY PRACTICE: Add someone new to your current circle of "family." Pray for them; perform a random act of kindness.

ADVENT PRAYER: God who Gathers All, help me see today the ways we belong together, rather than our differences; our unity as family, rather than our separateness.

Stillness reveals presence

When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. MATTHEW 1:24

Joseph's story is fascinating. The gospels record no word that he spoke, but they do tell us about his actions: he took Mary to be his wife; he traveled to Bethlehem; he guided Mary and Jesus, fleeing into Egypt; when it was safe, he guided them to Nazareth; he carefully provided for Jesus and Mary.

Before these courageous actions could take place, Joseph must have been immersed in stillness, taking to heart the Old Testament passage: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:11).

At times, especially during this hectic Advent season, am I always searching rather than realizing in times of stillness that God is right here? Pope Francis reminds us that God "always takes the first step. He comes toward us."

DAILY PRACTICE: In these remaining Advent days and the coming Christmas season, find time each day for quiet prayer and listening so that you might come to a deeper awareness of God's presence.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Stillness, calm me down. Help me to escape from a frenzied searching. Nudge me to be rooted in quiet, in listening, and in a deepening awareness of you. Help me to experience and cherish your enveloping closeness.

Living in joy

My mouth shall be filled with your praise...I will treat of the mighty works of the LORD. PSALM 71:8, 16

An often-quoted message from Pope Francis is, “When you live the gospel, don’t look like you have just come back from a funeral! Don’t give in to discouragement, but open your heart to the joy of Christ.”

Today’s responsorial psalm speaks of joyfully praising God because of God’s expansive works. In today’s gospel, the angel tells Zechariah that he will have joy and gladness because of God’s promise.

I am sure that everyone reading this is carrying some worry, fear, disappointment, or loss—and it might be magnified at this time of Advent-Christmas celebration. Yet, in the midst of our troubles, we also have been given so much. God’s mighty works—God’s gifts and promises to us—surround and sustain us. Our response, then, as Pope Francis reminds us, is to choose to live in joy rather than in discouragement.

DAILY PRACTICE: In the next few days, when you experience or reflect on your worries, fears, or frustrations, choose to think thoughts and speak words of praise; decide to share joy with others.

ADVENT PRAYER: Mighty God, Source of All Joy, kindle in me your spirit of gladness so that I can replace discouragement with awareness of all your works, sharing joy with those I touch these days.

Waiting together

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste.

LUKE 1:39

Two beggars knocked on a door asking for bread. One beggar was given a loaf and went away. The other was kept waiting and waiting. At length, the second beggar became concerned. “Why am I being denied? What is so lacking in me that the other one was favored over me?” he asked himself. Unknown to the beggar, a fresh loaf was being baked for him inside the house.

In today’s “instant, fast-food” culture, waiting may be one of the most difficult things we’re called to do. Today’s beautiful gospel is a story of waiting. Coming together, Elizabeth and Mary created space for each other to wait.

Mary’s visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for; the child within her leapt for joy. Mary then burst into joy herself at Elizabeth’s affirmation of her belief in God’s promise. They affirmed for each other that something was happening worth waiting for. The visit between Mary and Elizabeth is one of Scripture’s most vivid expressions of community, people gathered around a promise, affirming what is happening in their midst.

DAILY PRACTICE: Who has been with you during a waiting time? Write them an Advent note, thanking them for their unwavering presence.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of our Waiting Times, thank you for your promises, your reassurance that there are things worth waiting for.

Walking together

Mary...traveled to the hill country...where she...greeted Elizabeth.

LUKE 1:39-40

We hear again a pivotal story of this season: the visitation. Often we envision the young Mary traveling to help her older relative Elizabeth. In reality, there is mutuality.

The gospel reveals Elizabeth as a wise mentor for Mary. Elizabeth, living faithfully for many long years, has known God. Luke reminds us that she has been virtuous before God, living with integrity through all her days. She is just the one to accompany Mary throughout these uncertain, confusing days, the journey of understanding the gift to the world that will come because Mary said yes.

Within their mutual giving, Mary supports Elizabeth in her surprising journey. Together they are prophets of the new things God is doing. Many of the male prophets in Scripture are individuals, acting alone. The visitation is a female form of prophetic companionship. Mary and Elizabeth do not respond to the call to live faithfully and bring good news to the world each by herself; they realize their profound need for one another and for shared wisdom.

DAILY PRACTICE: Is there someone who needs you to walk the journey with them? “Visit” them in some way today.

ADVENT PRAYER: God of Companionship, you do more than “visit” us; you are persistently present. Help me to be present to others, especially those walking a confusing journey.

A prophetic prayer

“God...has shown the strength of his arm.”

LUKE 1:51

During the 1980s, the Guatemalan government banned the public recitation of the Magnificat, Mary’s song in today’s gospel. Why would that be?

Did you ever notice that Mary is never seen in a domestic setting (as so many women in Scripture are)? She talks to an angel, gives birth in a stable, flees to Egypt, celebrates at a wedding, and suffers at the foot of the cross. Perhaps this tells us about Mary: she was a prophet. Prophets are never shown in their own homes. They leave home to take God’s word to places where they are sent.

During the visitation, Mary praises God and sings of a new world seen through God’s eyes: a world of compassion for those on the margins (God has lifted up the lowly), of servant leadership (God has cast down the mighty from their thrones), of concern for the poor (God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty).

This is a prophetic prayer that would be a challenge to any leaders who care only about their power and supremacy.

DAILY PRACTICE: Place today’s newspaper and a copy of the Magnificat on your dinner table as a reminder to see the world through God’s vision.

ADVENT PRAYER: Pray the Magnificat as if it were your own prayer of praise, your prayer for today’s world.

Named by God

“He will be called John.”

LUKE 1:60

In formal settings, we might say, “My name is...” but usually we introduce ourselves with, “Hi, I’m...” Our name is who we are; it is linked with our identity. It’s not something separate from ourselves.

Today’s gospel—amid its many messages—reminds us of the importance of names. The Jewish custom of the time was to name a son after the father, grandfather, or other male ancestor. Thus, the family members and friends of Elizabeth and Zechariah are perplexed when Elizabeth says, “He will be called John.” Not trusting her, they go to Zechariah who, responding by writing on a tablet, agrees, “John is his name.”

Earlier the angel had told Zechariah that their long-awaited-for child was to be called John: God is gracious. The gift of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah flowed from God’s lavish grace. John’s life was marked and motivated by grace; he prepared the way for Jesus, who came to reveal the abundance of God’s grace.

What does your name mean? How have you lived it?

DAILY PRACTICE: As you pray today, ask yourself: what would God’s name for me be right now? What might it call me to do?

ADVENT PRAYER: God who Calls Us by Name, we are each unique in your sight. Because of your attentiveness to me, help me to spread your graciousness throughout my world.

God loves first

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; for he has come to his people and set them free.” LUKE 1:68

As part of Morning Prayer—from the church’s Liturgy of the Hours—many people begin their day by praying this song of praise and thanksgiving to God that Zechariah sang at the birth of his son, John the Baptist. It reminds us that everything begins with God. God loves us unconditionally—period. God doesn’t love us because we do good things. God loves us totally; we do good because we’ve experienced God’s love.

God doesn’t love us because we pray and participate in liturgy. God loves us unreservedly—period. We pray and worship because we’ve experienced God’s love. God doesn’t love us because we’re kind. God loves us utterly—period. We are kind because we’ve experienced God’s love. God doesn’t love us because we’ve lived a lifetime of caring for others, of charity and justice. God loves us absolutely—period. We care and reach out because we’ve experienced God’s love.

DAILY PRACTICE: In your morning prayer, take a few quiet moments to be overwhelmed by God’s extravagant love for you. Because of it, what will you do today?

ADVENT PRAYER: Generous God, in many ways, your love is beyond comprehension. Deepen my awareness of it—and my response to you.

A sheltering home

“Do not be afraid.” LUKE 2:10

The author John Jay Chapman remarked: “People get so in the habit of worry that if you save them from drowning and put them on a bank to dry in the sun with hot chocolate and muffins they wonder whether they are catching cold.”

The admonition to not be afraid, to not worry, is the most frequent caution in Scripture. In the Advent and Christmas readings alone, it is mentioned four times—to Mary, Zechariah, Joseph, and, in today’s reading, to the shepherds.

No one is afraid of a newborn child. Most people want to take a newborn into their arms. God has chosen to come to us as a newborn child so that we would approach God without fear. There is nothing to fear because God, in becoming one of us, has made a home for us.

The mystery of Emmanuel (God with us) is God’s surprising everyday presence with us, totally and constantly, amid our fears and joys, in ordinary ways and in surprising ways.

DAILY PRACTICE: During these twelve days of Christmas, what one fear can you let go of? How might you reach out to someone who is afraid of their life circumstances?

CHRISTMAS DAY PRAYER: God who Dissolves all Fears, thank you for providing a safe home. In these Christmas days, empower me to trust in your protection—and share that shelter with others.