

Advent Day-by-Day

ALL are called to holiness

What a cast of characters fills the Advent Scriptures! An unorthodox prophet, who doesn't come from the religious establishment, and attracts crowds in the desert, not the Temple. A homeowner, a Roman centurion, fisherfolk, a shepherd, a paralytic, a son who rethinks his original "no" to his father, an unwed mother, her puzzled fiancé, her older, pregnant relative and two babies. Ordinary folks like us. The only priest in the stories, Zechariah, does not fare well. He's struck speechless for questioning the fantastic news of his wife's pregnancy.

On October 11, 2012, we'll celebrate the 50th anniversary of opening Vatican Council II. One of its documents, *Lumen Gentium* ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church") contained a chapter called "The Universal Call to Holiness." Did its authors think of these Advent figures when it stressed that Christ calls everyone to holiness and offers the grace to accomplish sanctity in a rich variety of forms?

In contrast to earlier Church documents, this one didn't enforce rules or condemn bad behavior. Instead, it spoke of God's people in warm terms of dignity, welcome, tenderness and safe haven. If we ever thought holiness was limited to a narrow few, let's explore its broader meaning this Advent.

BY KATHY COFFEY

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First Week of Advent

SUNDAY: On the lookout, alert

Anyone who travels knows the drill: Stop the mail and newspaper. Ask a friend to water the plants and feed the dog. Check that windows are locked. Those things seem pretty basic to responsible homeowners. And if we're the house sitter, we don't want to be caught with our feet up, enjoying the owner's beer or partying with our friends when the owner returns.

Through this comparison, Jesus says, "I've given you so much. Can't you care responsibly for the gifts, and be grateful to the giver? Come to me during this season—don't be distracted by imposters who don't deserve your attention."

MONDAY: A soldier's words

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

For the first time this Advent, we'll hear the centurion's words from the Gospel in the new translation of the Mass. This occurs during the Lamb of God prayer just before Communion. This powerful, efficient Roman expressed great confidence in Jesus' ability to heal—and spared him the cultural embarrassment of a Jew entering a pagan's home.

TUESDAY: A child's brilliance

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

When Jesus praises children (and the childlike) it's a good time to pause and ask: What important understanding have I learned from people not necessarily known for their status, education, wealth or power? Have they taught me wonder, gratitude, generosity, tenderness?

WEDNESDAY: The call of a friend

Rom 10:9-18; Mt 4:18-22

We are all called, maybe in less dramatic ways than the fishermen of today's Gospel. During Advent,

what's the special call? Some may need to slow down from a hectic pace and give more time to quiet prayer. Others may simply need to appreciate that life at this time is chaotic—and be grateful for the children or relatives who cause commotion. Some may feel called to service, others to journal or reflect on nature or the arts.

This season has inspired wonderful sculpture, painting, music and literature—enjoy it!

THURSDAY: A firm foundation

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

What foundation can we build that is solid as the rock Jesus describes in today's Gospel? Long ago, St. Benedict recommended prayer and work as the balanced activities which ground a lifetime. If we let work grow out of proportion, we risk losing the meaning of life. If we don't work, we risk wasting our talents.

FRIDAY: Seeing our blindness

Is 29:17-24; Mt 9:27-31

In what areas do we still have blind spots? Is one recognizing our own holiness? Vatican II reminded the laity that we participate in Christ's priestly, prophetic and regal roles.

We have a great dignity because we sanctify ourselves and others through our work as plumbers, nurses, attorneys, farmers, parents, musicians, clerks, mechanics, teachers and librarians. May Jesus open our eyes to our importance as he did the blind men's.

SATURDAY: Y'all come

Is 30:19-21, 23-26;

Mt 9:35-10:1, 5a, 6-8

It seems as though Jesus' heart broke when he saw crowds abandoned, without leadership. When he asks God to send laborers for the harvest, he doesn't specify clergy, religious, religious professionals or Ph.D.s in theology. The harvest is so great, he needs everyone!



Second Week of Advent

SUNDAY: Unlikely prophets

Last time we checked, John the Baptist had no prophet credentials. No degrees from the Jerusalem University, no clerical collar, no published articles or books. We're tempted to join the doubting chorus that demands, "Who do you think you are?"

Hmmm...is John surprisingly like ourselves? We may not have doctorates, but we yearn for Christ. We're born seekers. Saints and sinners alike, we anticipate his coming. And we're filled with the Spirit's gifts that help us call out a welcome and straighten the path.

MONDAY: The untried path

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

Sometimes our friends bring us to Jesus. Sometimes we bring our friends. Recall times when you've had both experiences. Ordinary people can find creative pathways to Christ, even if it means going through the roof.

TUESDAY: What would you do?

Is 40:1-11; Mt 18:12-14

It is kind of Jesus to ask his listeners' opinion. Any parent or teacher among

them could've answered his question. Do we seek out the lost one? Of course, we funnel the time, energy and money to the one who needs it most. Of course, the shepherd must place the needs of the 99 other sheep on hold while he searches for the one that's lost. Finding it, he rejoices. Do we too celebrate even our smallest successes?

WEDNESDAY: Take a break

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

Today's Gospel brings relief to weary Christmas shoppers, bakers, decorators and planning committees. The burden of creating the perfect holiday is something we place on ourselves. Jesus asks instead that we simply rest in the love that first loved us from the beginning.

THURSDAY: Feast of the Immaculate Conception

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

Gabriel's words to Mary are addressed to all of us. We too, have found favor with God. We believe the Lord is always with us. We are also called to bear Christ into our particular settings: home, work, neighborhood, city. He waits on us to bring him there.

FRIDAY: Spirituality 101

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

Even children in the marketplace know enough to dance with the flute and mourn with a dirge. What Jesus asks of us is basic: total dependence on the mercy and love of God, our careful parent. Otherwise, we lose our dignity and freedom, becoming alienated.

SATURDAY: Hidden in plain sight?

Si 48:1-4, 9-11; Mt 17:9a, 10-13

We, like Jesus' audience here, often miss the prophets in our midst. How might we recognize them? A few signals might point them out: they disrupt our cozy routines, present new ideas we find unsettling and ask us to reach beyond our comfort zones. Know anyone like that?

Third Week of Advent

SUNDAY: Bottom line identity

In today's Gospel, John is secure enough to deny being the Messiah, Elijah or the Prophet. He is content to be simply who he is.

Can we too rest securely in the knowledge that we are cherished by a God who pursues us passionately? If we can burrow deep into that identity, we don't much need pretension, titles, acclaim, prestige or perfect Christmas gifts. We have enough.

MONDAY: Living fearlessly

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

Two lines from the Annunciation story can touch us deeply, where we live today. When Mary asks, "How can this be?" her words could also be spoken by the person who works hard—but loses a job, or the one who tries to eat healthily and exercise—but still gets cancer.

God doesn't explain such puzzles, but Gabriel does tell Mary not to fear. What a contrast to governments, institutions and airport security systems that try to induce fear so the troublesome public can be more easily controlled!

TUESDAY: The right afterthought

Zep 3:1-2, 9-13; Mt 21:28-32

Today's parable could easily be set in our homes, parishes or even our own hearts. How often we jump with enthusiasm into a project, then fade out as it becomes difficult. The first son, who initially says "no," then changes his mind, should alert us: sometimes there's virtue in the second thought, the delayed response, restraint rather than zeal.

WEDNESDAY: Proof in the deeds

Is 45:6c-8, 18, 21c-25; Lk 7:18b-23

Even the towering figure of John the Baptist was sometimes unsure. If he were totally convinced by Jesus, he wouldn't have sent his disciples to ask, "Are you

the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Lk 7:19). Jesus' response isn't a philosophical argument or theological treatise. Instead, he points to actions that soothe the aching human heart: illness cured, the dead raised and the poor hearing good news. How often do we see marvelous deeds and still doubt?

THURSDAY: God's voice and hands

Is 54:1-10; Lk 7:24-30

In today's Gospel, Jesus praises John the Baptist's ordinary holiness. He isn't dressed luxuriously and doesn't live in a palace. He is great because he is God's messenger. So are we, if we take our calling seriously. We may be the only messenger God can send to a family member, a work colleague, a hurting neighbor or a confused child.

FRIDAY: Light bearers

Is 56:1-3a, 6-8; Jn 5:33-36

Jesus so beautifully describes a Christian as "a burning and shining lamp" (Jn 5:35). As the calendar approaches the year's darkest night, reflect on those who have brought you light. When did they do so? How did they bring it? How have you yourself brought a glimmer of light into someone else's darkness?

Late Advent (*Saturday will always be December 17 or later.*)

DECEMBER 17:

The miracle in the mess

Gn 49:2, 8-10; Mt 1:1-17

As Father Raymond Brown has often explained, Matthew's genealogy is filled with scoundrels—and these are only a few examples. Jacob bartered a bowl of stew to snatch his brother's birthright, then disguised himself as Esau to steal his father's blessing. Rahab ran a brothel; David was an adulterer; Judah impregnated his daughter-in-law, Tamar, with twins, mistaking her for a prostitute. And we think our press is filled with scandals! But they all played their parts, contributing to a larger story than their own messy individual lives. As a matter of fact, so do we.

Fourth Week of Advent

SUNDAY: Anticipation builds

This week, the vast and venerable institution of the Church becomes as charmingly excited as small children awaiting Christmas or a family anticipating a new baby. Indeed, we have cause for rejoicing. God becoming human makes all of human life sacred. Because of the Incarnation, nothing is beyond God's reach. God, who is always present, seems especially close at moments when new life springs forth. Human beings are the sonnets and sonatas God creates—and delights in.

DECEMBER 19:

What's staring you in the face?

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

At a time when many couples seek infertility treatments, the dilemma of Zechariah and Elizabeth seems surprisingly modern. In their culture, childlessness was a disgrace. Primitive biology always blamed the woman. Despite his prestige in the synagogue and his performance of ritual incensing, Zechariah misses marvelous news dropped in his lap, blazed before his face. His story is a warning to us: Don't get so caught up in churchy events and pious customs that we ignore the wonders right at home in front of our eyes.

DECEMBER 20:

A most unexpected sign

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

When a ruler like Ahaz is invited to ask the Lord for a sign, we can speculate what he might want: A military victory? An infusion of gold to fund his army? A luxurious palace?

God thinks differently: The sign God promises is a baby. All over the world, to young and probably bewildered human families, God continues to send this sign. What more proof do we need to believe in blessing?

DECEMBER 21:

Underneath the commonplace

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

Mary and Elizabeth could be two soccer moms chatting over the back fence, steeped in the ordinary. Pregnancy has prompted many women's conversations—except that in difficult circumstances, these two don't grumble; they praise.

As Sister Elizabeth Johnson points out, it's a rare occasion in the Bible where two women prophesy, without a male presence. Apparently they don't need clerical permission or hierarchical approval. They speak from their deepest identity as God's daughters, or as Vatican II might have said, the people of God.

DECEMBER 22:

One among us sings

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

Mary's song has always threatened the establishment and uplifted the powerless. It springs from the core where God abides, the source of her nobility and voice. As Sister Fran Ferder says, "Mary here stands among women, not above them. She is blessed because of God's grace, not because of any gigantic deeds the young girl has done." Mary encourages us to sing our own "Magnificats" because we too carry the mighty God within.

DECEMBER 23:

Called by name

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

In Jewish culture, the break from a traditional family name promised a new order. Not naming this son for his father, but instead calling him "John," meant he would be unusual, not the same boring repetition of the past. His mother is the first to change the custom—a shift in patriarchal structures. During a long enforced silence, Zechariah has learned to agree with her. Every human child is unusual; every child has unique potential; each one's name is engraved on the palm of God's hand.



CHRISTMAS:

Grace upon grace

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

Joy abounds this day—in our hearts, our families, our churches, our world. Today it seems easier to see the Christ light in everyone we meet and to cherish the divine image in the human face. Even if our holiday isn't the ideal image the media presents, we can rejoice in knowing that "Of his fullness we have all had a share—love following upon love" (Jn 1:16). ■

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