

***Hope in the Darkness:  
Daily Devotions for Advent 2020***

***The First Week of Advent***



## *Introduction*

Advent is a season of hope. And not in the common sense of the term. Christian hope doesn't share a sense of wishful thinking: "I hope it doesn't rain today," or "I hope to get that promotion," or whatever it may be. It is the shocking surprise of brokenness unfolding into blessing—we move down through the darkness into healing light. That sense of light dispelling darkness, or even born out of darkness, is the heart of Advent. This is quite literally the case in the northern hemisphere, where on just about the darkest day of the year the light of the world breaks in to redeem it.

And we long for that inbreaking, that light peeking through the cracks of our lives and world, rolling back the darkness, training our eyes to see again. This year in particular has been a difficult one for most people, a dark one we could say. So, this year we are in a place to maybe experience that inbreaking with a little more of the genuine shock and surprise that the story of our salvation demands—to meet the presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us, not in the overly familiar, adorable and darling, sweet and comfortable baby Jesus, but the overwhelming eternal light invading every corner of every darkened room of fear, anxiety, worry, and sin. The birth of Christ is the infinite love of God inhabiting the tiny, frail, entirely dependent, helpless frame of an infant's body. This is an extraordinary hope. If God's love meets us even there, in the stinking animal trough in the backwoods of a tiny town in all the weakness of infancy, God's love reaches everywhere.

The expectancy of Advent, the delight and desire of it, is full of both great rejoicing and a sobering, still suspense. Both of these are extremely difficult to find in the days, weeks, and even sometimes months leading up to Christmas. With cheesy pop Christmas tunes blaring through shopping plazas from late October, a post-Thanksgiving haze of shopping, cooking, cleaning, stressing, shopping, planning, and shopping again, it is a near impossible feat to enter into a time of stillness, waiting, reflection, and repentance—to keep alert for the coming of Christ in a season so frantic, muddled, and hectic. Somehow, the advent of an impoverished illegitimate child born to a refugee family in a barn for our salvation has become just another concerted effort to glorify the destructive consumer urges that both disregard people like him and tend to turn us toward idols.

Perhaps this year can be different. Perhaps in a time when shopping and traveling and all the go-go-going of a typical December have been switched off; perhaps this year, when we are finally realizing how much of our lives is completely out of our control, we can rest into that waiting, that hope—preparing ourselves, making room for the advent of Christ.

These short, daily Advent reflections I hope will enrich your experience of expectancy, desire, and hope—help you to slow down and prepare yourself for the radical inbreaking of God's love at Christmas; for the surprising and unexpected coming of our Savior.

I thought through many ways of potentially doing this: traditional Advent themes of death, judgment, hell, and heaven, following the prophetic texts in Isaiah about

Christ's coming, looking at the forebears of Christ who pointed to his coming from ancient Israel through to Mary and John the Baptist, but I thought that reflecting on the narratives of Luke's Gospel leading to the birth of Christ would be particularly meaningful for us in this time. I hope that we can find ourselves in the stories—in the midst of the hope, the fear, the expectation, the uncertainty, the glory—and that our own lives and stories can be changed by them.

For the first week of Advent, we're contemplating the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and announces to her that she will bear forth Christ into the world for our salvation. The Feast of the Annunciation is actually the 25<sup>th</sup> of March (exactly nine months before the birth of Jesus at Christmas, naturally) and so it is not liturgically a part of the celebration of Advent, but it is where Christ's *adventus* (Latin for "arrival" or "coming") begins, and the gospel reading of the Annunciation comes up on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

For Advent week 2 we look a bit closer at the Visitation, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and learns that she too is pregnant, a bit further along than Mary, and will give birth to John the Baptist, who will, from the desolate wilderness, will prepare the way for Christ. The Feast of the Visitation also lies outside the season of Advent (May 31<sup>st</sup>), but Mary's Song (the *Magnificat*) that she sings when she visits Elizabeth comes as the Gospel reading on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent or can be used as the canticle in place of the Psalm on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday, depending on the lectionary being used.

The birth of John the Baptist is the next scene in the story and will be the focus of the reflections for the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of Advent. Advent 3 always looks to John the Baptist, and it is a time when we learn from John to live and proclaim the truth, preparing the world to meet Christ.

In the final week of Advent we will reflect on the Holy Family's journey to Bethlehem and the events leading up to the birth of Jesus.

Through art, poetry, and prayer I hope these reflections provide you the space you need to sit for a while and prepare yourself for the advent of our Savior—the light in the darkness who moves us through brokenness to benediction.

Wishing you a peaceful Advent,

Fr Jarred

# ***Advent Week 1***

## ***Sunday***

Each Sunday, join together in the offering of our communal worship through our service of Spiritual Communion at 9.00am here:

<http://www.youtube.com/StPaulsChurchNewburyportMA>, or if you prefer through the local television channels when the service is available: Channel 8 in Newburyport broadcasts on Tuesday at 9:00 am, Thursday at 9:00 am, and Sunday at 10:30 am. Channel 9 in Newbury and Channel 18 in Salisbury broadcast on Wednesday at 9:00 am. Note: On a Monday holiday the Tuesday at 9:00 am service will be the previous week

Take time to rest today, reflect on the Collect for the Sunday (the Collect is a gathering prayer, bringing together our prayer intentions for the day or given theme), and, if you wish, read the Scripture passage for the week: Luke 1:26–38, located on the following page (or you can read this on Monday).

Collect for Advent 1:

*Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

**The Annunciation:** Luke 1.26-38:

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

---

*"Annunciation under Erasure," by Mary Szybist*

And he came to her and said  
The Lord is  
troubled  
in mind  
be afraid Mary  
The Holy  
will overshadow you  
therefore  
be  
nothing be impossible  
and Mary said  
And the angel departed from her

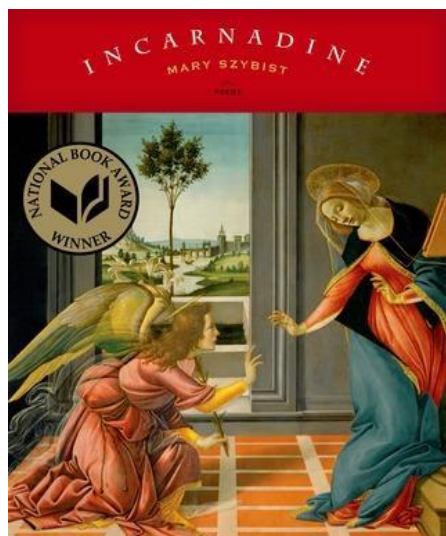




# Monday

The Annunciation must be one of the most commonly depicted scenes in the history of art. From paintings, to music, to poetry and narrative, the story of Gabriel's message to Mary—infused with doubt and belief, joy and sorrow, fear and comfort— has proved to be remarkably generative for both the life of faith and the creative impulse. It is a story sharing space with both devastation and hope, and this means it is a story for all of us, whoever we are and wherever we are in life.

Mary Szybist's remarkable collection of poetry, *Incarnadine*, was inspired by a personal tour of paintings of the Annunciation in Italy. She rewrites the narrative in poetic form over and over again through the different representations of it she finds in the paintings, confronting issues of modern life along the way and bringing in evocative tones of the sacred and profane, erotic, carnal, spiritual, and more. This simple erasure poem, a poem created literally from erasing parts of Luke's narrative, helps me to approach the Annunciation in an entirely new way.



We cannot imagine Mary—comforted here by the angel and comforted still along the way by Joseph not abandoning her, by her shared experience with her relative Elizabeth—as continuously recalling the event of the Annunciation in comfort, ease, and delight. And nowhere do we hear of her being entirely settled, unworried, and confident after her meeting with Gabriel. We cannot imagine that she didn't have to wrestle through those words of the angel: “Do not

be afraid, Mary,” each and every day. Maybe even chanting them like a mantra, like a blessing, like a song you can't get out of your head. Surely, she must have performed her own “erasure” time and time again: “be afraid Mary,” “be nothing,” “be impossible,” “and the angel departed.”

## *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Over and over again in the narratives of Advent and Christmas we hear the refrain: “Do not be afraid.” In what ways in your own life do you need to hear these words? Pause in stillness for a few minutes and repeat this line as a prayer: “Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you.”

## *Prayer for the Day:*

God of our comfort, you save us from the lies we believe about ourselves; when we are afraid of being nothing your love makes us something new, when our path is impossible you bless our way, when we are empty you fill us. Save us from our fear, help us hear your word and know that you are with us; through Christ our Savior, we know forever, you are with us. Amen.



“Annunciation” (2018), Angelika Sher

Lithuanian-born Israeli photographer Angelika Sher’s “Annunciation” is a sort of double self-portrait. It’s a photo of her, but her face shows in a mirror that is showing herself back to her. It’s a moving interpretation of how Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary reveals not only God and salvation to her but also reveals her true self to her. In all the fear, anxiety, joy, and redemption, Mary is enabled to move into herself—to be truly known as she comes to know God in her son Jesus. You can just see a hand popping around the edge of the mirror as well. This revelation cannot come to us on our own. Just as God uses Gabriel to reveal both God and Mary to Mary, others in our own life, like the hand holding up this mirror, will be used to show us who God is, who we are, and who we can become.

## Tuesday

Mary's response is a resounding "yes," her refrain the glorious *Magnificat* (discussed in week 2), but how many times must the fragmented memory of that angelic meeting replayed in her head with anxiety or fear or worry or doubt alongside the rejoicing? And how many times after stomach pains, or a fall, or not feeling the baby move for a while must the distressed thought, "something isn't right," consumed her mind regardless of miracle and promise? And how perfectly appropriate and real and human that is.

We all perform erasure in our lives, as in Szybist's poem above—replaying backwards and forwards times of loss or blessing or failure or confusion, sometimes differently each time. And that's OK. It's OK to enter into times of fear and doubt or uncertainty, but we also have to remain aware of our selective consciousness—that we are forgetting parts of ourselves; that we are practicing erasure. The story of the Annunciation is a story of uncertainty and belief, sorrow and joy, and everything in between, but it is also a story about radical newness, about openness, about beginnings. Just as Mary must have had her own erasures and fragmentations of memory, so would she have been able to recall and hear, "The Lord is with you"; so would she have been able to live the echo of her response again and again: "Here am I ... let it be with me according to your word."

So many times in our life we, like Mary, find ourselves in a place of the unexpected, the shocking, uncertain, and even fearful. In those moments, where we go from there is determined by where we turn (or *to whom* we turn) and who is with us (or, who we are with). Mary's openness to the unexpected—her surprise of both fear and joy—leads her to a place of renewal and redemption, an unfathomable new beginning, and it does so because her trust turns not to what she knows, not to the places she is comfortable or sure of herself, not to the point of lowest risk, but to the love and acceptance of God. And that trust, that leaning into God's love in the most trying of times, enables her to respond to God's presence by being present herself. The message of being with another comes not only from God through the Angel: "The Lord is with you," but from Mary back to God: "Here am I, Lord, I am with you too."

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ In this trying and difficult year, full of the unexpected, the uncertain, the fearful, where can you find opportunities to open up to God's presence, to hear the words of Gabriel: "The Lord is with you"? What ways can you offer yourself back to God and respond to God's presence with us by presenting yourself to God in return? Take some time to offer yourself to God's presence in prayer, maybe by sharing in Jesus' prayer of Psalm 31:5 on the cross: "Into your hands I commit my Spirit." Sometimes we may find this prayer is all we are able to say to God and we cannot find any other words. If we learn anything from the Annunciation to Mary, it is surely that that place of humility and need is not a bad place to be—it might in fact be exactly where we should be.



*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our darkness, you are present with us when we do not know how to be present to ourselves and you see us when our eyes fail to see; teach us to surrender to your presence and know that you are with us, that we too might be with you; through Jesus Christ our light. Amen.



“The Castello Annunciation” (1489), Sandro Botticelli

In Botticelli’s famous painting, you can sense Mary’s active presence with Gabriel. She is reaching out in response, maybe even with a hand of blessing, not only receiving the presence of God-with-us, Emmanuel, but being present herself. Her response, “Here am I,” to Gabriel’s words, “The Lord is with you,” is palpable here. Her face also in this painting is not, like in so many, one of shock and fear, but radiates the grace that Gabriel proclaimed in the words, “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

## Wednesday

The Annunciation seems almost forgotten today aside from its prevalence in the arts. But it's newness, that radical new beginning it brought about, was once felt more readily. "Lady Day," exactly nine months before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, was once the beginning of the new calendar year. Filled with promise and yet also that abruptness, that shock, that fright, the risk that new beginnings always bring. The Annunciation is a story ripe for both the rejoicings and the questions and uncertainties that life carries, and it's about opening up and receiving all of it.

Mary's unqualified "yes" to God, her openness to the light no matter what darkness came along with it, is remarkable—miraculous, really. And through that "yes" the world has been redeemed, through that miraculous faith our salvation was born. It is a particular awe-inspiring wonder that such darkness and difficulty, such fear and uncertainty surrounded that "yes." An unwed teenager facing potential abandonment and unthinkable hardship, who must have played her decision over and over again in her head, remained open—open and receptive, continually living into that wondrous response: "Here am I." And in that openness, in that *presence*, that "Here am I," "This is me, all of me, here, open, and ready," Mary finds herself full—full of grace, full of promise, full of new life, indeed, filled with the very Life of the world.

Mary has always been called the "God-bearer," or "Mother of God" (in the Greek *theotokos*) since the earliest Christians, first, because it is simply biblical. When Mary visits Elizabeth (next week's devotional focus), Elizabeth proclaims when she sees Mary: "Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me." The word here for "Lord" is the Greek *Kyrios*, which the New Testament (and the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament) uses to translate the Hebrew *Adonai*, the word the Hebrew language used for God as the name for God (YHWH) could not be spoken. The title "Mother of God" has always been significant in Christianity also because it demonstrates that Christ is fully divine—to bear Christ into the world is to bear the divine into the world. But the title for Mary also reminds us that the whole world comes to God through the humble means of her glorious "yes." God chose to redeem the world through the willingness and openness of this young woman. Everything, absolutely everything, is changed forever not only because of God's presence with us in Christ but also because of Mary's presence before God. "Here am I," the God-bearer says, and the world would never be the same.

The famous line of Gabriel to Mary: "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you," or, in other translations: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you," is remarkable. It reveals the special place Mary has in the story of our salvation, but these are also words we all need to hear. Even that simple, "Greetings," that "hello" that recognizes you as you. How extraordinary to receive the simple touch of a greeting from our Creator. And then more, you are "favored," you are "full of grace," you are "blessed," "I am with you, Mary." Can we hear those words, too? And can we respond in kind, returning the greeting, the recognition, the love with, "Here am I"?

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Listen for God's "hello," that greeting that calls you into being, that creates you, and that recognizes you as graceful and blessed as you are. It isn't always easy to hear, so much in our lives tries to tell us we are not worthy, we are not recognized or acknowledged. But God calls us by name, calls us out in blessing and favor. When we hear that "hello, favored one; hello, beloved," we can then begin to approach God in turn: "hello, here I am, let me be who you say that I am; let me live that blessed and favored life."

Sit with God today in prayer and try to share in Mary's words: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our welcome, you have called us beloved, favored, and blessed, and your word is always true; grant us grace to accept the marvel that we are: miracles of your love, wonders of your beauty, vessels of your grace, and to welcome ourselves as ourselves, that we, as Blessed Mary, might welcome you among us; through Jesus Christ who makes us known, here am I. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“The Annunciation (Cell 3)” (1440–42), Fra Angelico

Note Mary’s active participation, leaning into the grace being offered, even sharing Gabriel’s posture (or Gabriel is mimicking Mary’s more likely). You can see tangibly in her body and position that she is making herself present as an offering to God: “Here am I.” The Dominican to the left sees Mary for who she really is and invites the Dominicans who would have looked at the painting, invites us, to come and see as well.



## *Thursday*

Gabriel and Elizabeth's greetings to Mary have become one of the most important prayers in the history of Christianity: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death." The first half is, of course, straight from Luke 1—a mixture of the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth. The second half, which begins with Elizabeth's proclamation of Mary as the mother of the LORD, was popularized and became a standard part of the prayer during the time of medieval plagues in Europe. As people were coming to the hour of their death, they sought intercessions, prayers on their behalf, from Mary, the one who was the vessel that brought healing and salvation to the world. It is a particularly timely way in which the story of the Annunciation collides with ours.

The pandemic and trials of this year have destroyed at least one lie we constantly tell ourselves: that the "hour of our death" isn't upon us. The pandemic, with its complete disregard for person or circumstance, spreading with absolutely no discrimination, touching the lives of everyone in one way or another, has brought the reality and darkness of death close. For some, it has ushered that darkness in completely through their own death or the loss of loved ones. Death, sorrow, grief, have come closer and, depending on people's age or experience, possibly for the first time. For everyone this year the idea of death, even if only in the abstract, has been a close acquaintance. Being shaken from the illusion that we are invincible, or at least from the ability to treat death as an irrelevance that we really don't have to think about too much is sobering, but it also has the potential to awaken us to new ways of living.

The Annunciation is Mary's story in an irreducible particularity and at the same time the story of each of us, of any of us, met with the perfect love of God in the midst of our fear, our struggle, our poverty and weakness, our insecurity and doubt and hearing the words: "The Lord is with you, do not be afraid." The Annunciation is an opportunity for each of us to respond, to enter into that risk, that freedom, that openness; to say "yes" to such a love. And this opportunity is gifted to us because the story is as much or more about God's opening up to us as it is about Mary's opening up to God's plan and salvation. Mary opens up and receives God-among-us, Emmanuel, but God in Christ is also opening up and welcoming in human life and experience. At the root of the Annunciation is the new, radical, earthy manifestation of "The Lord is with you." The God of the universe opens up entirely to us, entirely to the weakness and beauty of humanity—God in the womb, God in the manger, who walks among our streets, holds little children, touches lepers, who, like us, faces the hour of death and dies in human flesh. There is no greater welcome, no wider openness, no fuller embrace, and no invitation more joyful than this. A God who heals us, but not from above or by edict or decree. A God who heals us from below, from the depths of our darkness. A God who on the cross heals us through wounds.



*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Christ meets us in our darkest hour, even the “hour of our death,” because Christ met that hour himself. And we know now that that hour is not our final hour but can be a way toward healing and salvation. How has Christ’s presence been shown in the difficulties of your own life? How has the light of the world shone in your darkness, whether this year or at other points in your life? Christ’s presence with us doesn’t lessen our suffering or make it any less real, but it might mean that we can learn to find Christ in the midst of it and in the process learn something profound about ourselves.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our healing, your love brings us from desolation to rejoicing, from penitence to praise, from brokenness to blessing; heal us through the wounds of Christ, that as the door of his tomb opened into resurrection so might our own wounds meet the touch of your healing love; through Jesus Christ, Emmanuel in our night, Emmanuel in our morning, God-with-us, world without end. Amen.

*[continues on the next page]*



“Annunciation” (1608), Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio)

All of Caravaggio’s paintings play heavily with light and darkness. Here, light is shining down upon Mary and Gabriel from above, illuminating the darkness so that we can just begin to see the surroundings, but only Mary’s face is fully visible—downtrodden, eyes closed, maybe in a way “blinded by the light.” The touch of God’s messenger comes to Mary, even in the midst of the dark. Mary has her arms crossed over her chest (as in Fra Angelico’s painting above) symbolizing humility and receptivity, but they’re lethargic and sluggish, as if in the midst of her struggle it is all she can do to hold them up.

# Friday

Mary's faith, her unconquerable "yes" to God, was not a blind or legalistic submission. She begins this journey of becoming the *theotokos* by first being "troubled," or as the NRSV translation has it, "perplexed." "She was troubled by [Gabriel's] words." The Greek literally says, "thrown into utter confusion," or, "utterly confounded," even, "disturbed." She then questions the angel, "how can this be?" She is honest with God's messenger, she wrestles with God's call, struggles to understand what is happening. That honesty is essential to the narrative. And Mary's openness and faithfulness are no less full, no less perfect for it.

We shouldn't expect anything different of ourselves. Sometimes it seems difficult, even impossible, to know what direction we should go or where our life is headed. Sometimes it may even seem challenging to care. If we sit in the dark long enough, it starts to feel like home—and when the light comes it is just confounding, disturbing even. But sometimes too, times of darkness can enable us to focus on the light when it comes. They can prepare us, make us ready to give our "yes" when the light cracks through the insecure surfaces of that temporary home.

Mary's "yes" is the vessel through which God-among-us steps into our world and opens up to us as one of us. Our "yes" today is not a claim to perfection or a statement of moral superiority any more than the days we can only bring ourselves to say, "no, I just can't" mark us out as deficient or failures. The openness of God's love is unending, so that wherever we find ourselves we are welcomed and embraced. So, whatever these strained circumstances we're in and whatever insecurity they may cause, "the Lord is with you, do not be afraid."

## *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Can you think of a time in your life, maybe recently, maybe years ago, when the light of God's truth and love broke into a dark moment or time in your life? What was it that enabled you to see that light? If you are in a time now when it seems like the light is dim or too far from your current experience, this is not a cause for shame, and you are not alone. Take a moment to reflect on the phrase, "the Lord is with you," and what that means for you in your current circumstances.

## *Prayer for the Day:*

God of our confusion, you meet us in our times of uncertainty and trouble and reveal your love to us when we cannot find it on our own; teach us to seek after the light of your presence even when the darkness makes it hard to move forward or have the will to do so; through Christ our light and every desire. Amen.



“The Annunciation” (1898), Henry Ossawa Tanner

Henry Ossawa Tanner was the first African American painter to gain international recognition. He was from Pittsburgh, though lived much of his adult life in France. He travelled to Jerusalem to gain a more realistic perspective for his paintings of biblical and religious subjects. Tanner was a realist, so painting a scene with an angel, something that cannot be seen or empirically observed, wasn't really a viable option. So, in his painting of the Annunciation Gabriel isn't a well-built winged man with flowy blond hair. Tanner's Gabriel is pure light. And Tanner's Mary is not robed in royal array but is wearing the plain threads of a young 19th-century impoverished middle-eastern woman with nothing to her name. The light is not only illuminating her room but drawing her in. Her eyes gaze as if they are being pulled toward the light—that confounding mystery that changes everything.

# *Saturday*

After reflecting throughout the week on the Annunciation, maybe we can enter into the prayers associated with it in a new way. For some, the prayer we call the *Angelus* (the Latin word for “angel” or “messenger,” which is the first word of the prayer) might be entirely new. For others, I hope that reflecting and praying through the story this past week can help you connect with this prayer in new ways. The *Angelus* has been a central prayer through the centuries in Anglican (Episcopalian), Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, and other Christian traditions. Monastic communities and churches often ring *Angelus* bells as a call to prayer, ringing the church bells three times for each of the three sections of the prayer and then 9 times during the final prayer, which is the collect for the Feast of the Annunciation.

If the prayer is new to you, try to open yourself up to see what you can find here and how you can connect with God through it. It is a prayer of the Incarnation, as all Marian prayers and devotions are, and it’s perfect for leading up to Christmas. In the major Christological debates in early Christianity (debates about the nature of Christ), the councils of the Church and theologians saw it as an absolute essential to call Mary *theotokos*, or, “Mother of God”/“God-bearer,” as it was a definitive declaration that Jesus Christ, whom Mary bore, was indeed fully God. And Mary in Christian theology has remained always at the center of Christology—and always centered on Christ (in other words, any time Mary plays a role in theology, it is to point to Christ and draw us closer to Christ). Some contemporary versions of Protestantism have left this behind, but it isn’t really true to their own history or self-understanding. The reformers Luther (Lutherans), Calvin (Presbyterian and other reformed), Cranmer (Anglicans/Episcopalians), and even Zwingli, who had more radical protesting views, while they sought to reform numerous points of the Church in their day, they all maintained Marian devotion, knowing that devotion to Mary is always about elevating our devotion to Jesus.

Praying the *Angelus* is about entering into that place where the God of our salvation enters into our life and world, with all the fear, anxiety, uncertainty, joy, and most of all hope that we encounter in Advent.

## *The Angelus*

The angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary  
And she conceived by the Holy Ghost.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;  
Blessed art thou among women,  
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now,  
And at the hour of our death. Amen.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord:  
Be it unto me according to thy word



Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;  
Blessed art thou among women,  
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now,  
And at the hour of our death. Amen.

And the Word was made flesh:  
And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;  
Blessed art thou among women,  
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now,  
And at the hour of our death.

Pray for us holy Mother of God:  
That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

We beseech thee, O Lord, pour thy grace into our hearts, that as we have known the  
incarnation of thy Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and  
passion, we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection; through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

***Hope in the Darkness:  
Daily Devotions for Advent 2020***

***The Second Week of Advent  
“The Visitation”***



*Fr Jarred*

## ***Sunday***

Each Sunday, join together in the offering of our communal worship through our service of Spiritual Communion at 9.00am here:

<http://www.youtube.com/StPaulsChurchNewburyportMA>,

or if you prefer through the local television channels when the service is available: Channel 8 in Newburyport broadcasts on Tuesday at 9:00 am, Thursday at 9:00 am, and Sunday at 10:30 am. Channel 9 in Newbury and Channel 18 in Salisbury broadcast on Wednesday at 9:00 am. Note: On a Monday holiday the Tuesday at 9:00 am service will be the previous week

Take time to rest today, reflect on the Collect for the Sunday (the Collect is a gathering prayer, bringing together our prayer intentions for the day or given theme), and, if you wish, read the Scripture passage for the week: Luke 1:39–56, located on the following page (or you can read this on Monday).

Collect for Advent 2:

*Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

***The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Luke 1:39–56***

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*And Mary said,  
"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

*And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

*"The Visitation," by Elizabeth Jennings*

*She had not held her secret long enough  
To covet it but wished it shared as though  
Telling it would tame the terrifying moment  
When she, most calm in her own afternoon,  
Felt the intrepid angel, heard  
His beating wings, his voice across her prayer.*

*This was the thing she needed to impart  
The uncalm moment, the strange interruption,  
The angel bringing pain disguised as joy,  
But mixed with this was something she could share*

And not abandon, simply how  
A child sprang in her like the first of seeds.

And in the stillness of that other day  
The afternoon exposed its emptiness,  
Shadows adrift from light, the long road turning  
In a dry sequence of the sun. And she  
No apprehensive figure seemed,  
Only a moving silence through the land.

And all her journeying was a caressing  
Within her mind of secrets to be spoken.  
The simple fact of birth soon overshadowed  
The shadow of the angel. When she came  
Close to her cousin's house she kept  
Only the message of her happiness.

And those two women in their quick embrace  
Gazed at each other with looks undisturbed  
By men or miracles. It was the child  
Who laid his shadow on their afternoon  
By stirring suddenly, by bringing  
Back the broad echoes of those beating wings.





# Monday

*Then the angel departed from her.*

This is really where the story of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth begins. ". . . Mary went out with haste" to see Elizabeth, yes, but first she was left alone. The marvel of the Annunciation, God's greeting to Mary, had come to an abrupt close.

*When she, most calm in her own afternoon,  
Felt the intrepid angel, heard  
His beating wings, his voice across her prayer.*

*This was the thing she needed to impart  
The uncalm moment, the strange interruption,  
The angel bringing pain disguised as joy*

And now that "strange interruption" to her ordinary calm was gone, and her "ordinary" could never be the same again. Everyday life was surely now a reality in which she could not shake that interruption, that jolt and shock of new life and promise, but one also that brought "pain disguised as joy." What a telling phrase. Sometimes the truth of our lives can only ring out through the poetic. The normal constructions of words can't do it justice, and poetry creates new worlds, new ways of knowing—puts language to the realities too deep for it when our minds can't wrap around the shape of our lives. Jennings' poem certainly opens up the narrative of the Visitation in new and unexpected ways—putting words to things too deep for them.

The angel is "intrepid" in the midst of Mary's calm but also a voice across her prayer; the message, the promise, is joy, but at the same time pain disguised as joy. In our ordinary language these things seem contradictory, maybe almost opposites, but in the reality of our lives, in our lived experience, we know they aren't. Ordinary language falls short of our true experience because our lives are not newspaper columns, they are poems. Our lives don't consist of "yesterday 'x' happened, today 'y' is happening, tomorrow 'z' will happen." They consist of "pain disguised as joy," "strange interruption," and a "voice across a prayer." And we have to pay attention. "Stay awake!" is one of the primary calls of Advent—learning to be attentive, to notice the unassuming and ordinary in our lives, because it might be there, in "the most calm of our own afternoon," those moments when nothing really at all is happening, where poetic promise breaks in.

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ So much of life is found in the inexplicable and unexpected, in the strange interruption of what we think life should be, and sometimes in the absence of what we thought we needed: *The angel departed from her*. Sometimes life is like enjambment, the unexpected or unknown turn in a line or stanza of a poem. "To covet it but wished it shared as though" ... as though what? We have to keep moving to live into the answer. Think about and pray through the "strange interruptions"

to your life this past year. Perhaps it has been great loss, perhaps uncertainty or fear, perhaps even some positive interruptions like more time with children or family. Offer the interruptions to God and ask for the will and strength to move into life's unknown next steps, to go beyond the enjambment of this point in your life.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our unexpected, in Christ you entered our world of risk and uncertainty; give us the strength to keep awake, to meet you in the ordinary, and follow you even when our way is unclear; through Jesus Christ, who with the Holy Spirit never departs from us. Amen.



“Visitation” (1996), Dinah Roe Kendall

Dinah Roe Kendall is a contemporary British artist who has focussed extensively on reinterpreting biblical narrative into modern life. The clear influence of my favorite twentieth-century artist, Stanley Spencer, in both Kendall's style and subject matter is undeniable. Spencer brought the life of Christ into modern perspective in an ingenious

way. Here in Kendall's painting, the urgency of Mary "setting out in haste" to see Elizabeth. Elizabeth, much further along in pregnancy than Mary, makes her greeting of blessing to Mary physical, flinging open her mid-century townhouse door with arms spread wide. Notice Mary's handbag. Scripture says Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, around the time John was born, but she doesn't arrive with a trunk full of suitcases. The angel departed and she set off to her cousin, in the midst of all the joy and fear, uncertainty and hope her new promise brings.

## Tuesday

*Then the angel departed from her.* Sometimes it takes the departure of the extraordinary for us to realize just how astonishing our ordinary can be. This departure seems to me a critical point in Mary's life—here she moves from encounter into the life of daily faith. She enters the remarkable point of her life where she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth as blessed not because she sits in the presence of the archangel but because when she finds the strength to stand again, she walks through the rest of her life as the one “who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

The Christian life is not about extraordinary feats of faith, at least not as they are typically conceived. We are not called to single-handedly save the world, but to trust God's promises; not to achieve greatness or success, but to open up to the life God has on offer for us—to give our “yes” to the fullness of grace and live into the unexpected found in ordinary, everyday kindness, mercy, forgiveness, joy and, yes, even “pain disguised as joy.” It's the quick embrace of these two women “undisturbed by men or miracles;” the basic, rudimentary, natural stir of a baby in Elizabeth's womb that brings back “echoes of those beating wings.” It's the simple and ordinary as much as the grand. No one ever became a saint by trying to become a saint. And this is the poetic genius of living. Because that poetry of life, like all poetry, brings the most valuable and yet completely useless knowledge. Useless in the sense that it is not utilitarian, it is not a tool to something else beyond it but is good and beautiful and true and desirable in itself—because it *is* and is *itself*. We do not “get something out of it,” we become something through it. All of life's encounters can be summed up in this poetic—from “The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” to “then the angel departed from her.”

Life, as poetry, is also about disruption—it shakes us out of our comfort, destabilizes us, but not in a destructive way, in a way that creates a new imagination, that makes new things possible, maybe even things that we once thought impossible. *She most calm in her own afternoon ...* and then—*intrepid-beating-voice-needed-uncalm-angel bringing pain*; then, *Mary set out and went in haste*, as the impossible became her new everyday ordinary. And there is no recovery from this. There is no going back after the trauma of encountering God, there is only moving forward, sometimes setting out in haste, even when we aren't entirely sure where we're headed.

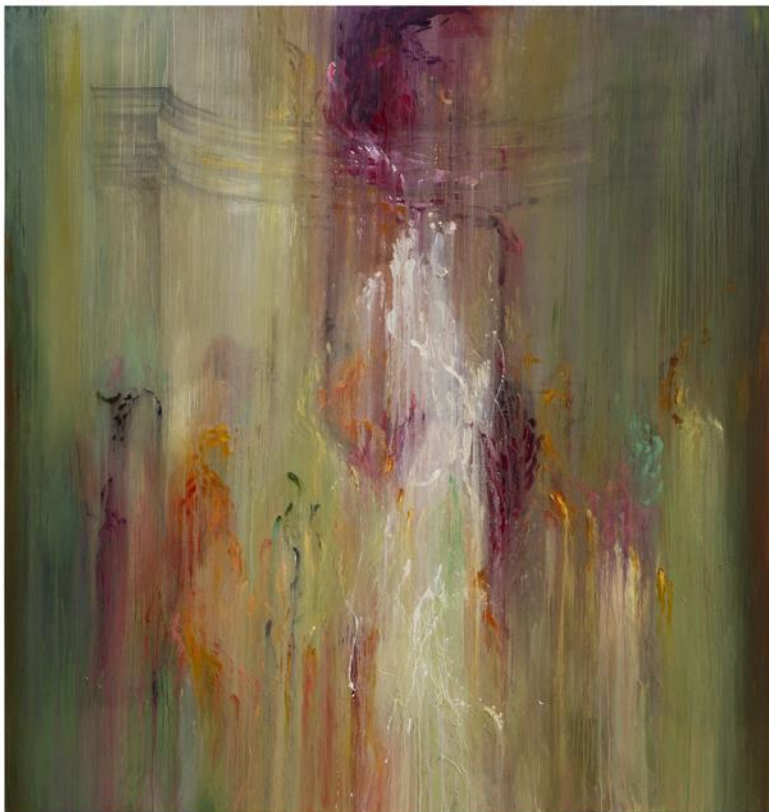
### Notes for Reflection:

- ◆ In almost every aspect of our life we are “shoppers,” consumers looking to gain or get or obtain rather than grow and become. We are trained up into this way of living and it is just natural for us (the #1 form of communication in the world is now advertising, for example). Our society is a largely utilitarian one, in which almost everything seems to be a means to an end. But the reality of our life is not utilitarian. Goodness, beauty, and truth are not tools to get something we desire

beyond them, they are worthy of our pursuit in themselves. This season of Advent is typically overwhelmed with hectic and abrasive consumer impulses. In a time when we should be yearning for the poetry of life, we are stuck thinking that our life should be lived as a means to something else. In this strange year, this “strange interruption,” how can you lean into the uselessness of God’s love? That love that is not a means to some other end but is the end and aim of all things.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of encounter, your touch is a holy disturbance; awaken us, startle us out of complacency and move us in haste to our home in your love; through Christ incarnate, the divine interruption. Amen.



“The Visitation (after Pontormo)” (1951),  
Lawrence Fodor



“Visitation” (1528–29),  
Jacopo da Pontormo

In Lawrence Fodor’s interpretation of Pontormo’s sixteenth-century painting only the encounter remains. We can’t look at the painting and make out exactly what is going on, we can’t get around the uncertainty, the mystery, we can only encounter the very “happening” of the painting. The painting isn’t a representation, it’s a moment. So often this is what the encounters of our life are like, what our encounter with God is like. At the time, maybe all we can do is live into the mystery. Perhaps eventually we will get a clearer understanding, like a look at Pontormo’s original, but that clarity isn’t the same thing as



that moment of encounter. In the same way no one could mistake Fodor's interpretation as an actual depiction of Pontormo's painting, we can't mistake "having it all figured out," or even having a full sense of clarity, with the trauma and transformation, the disruption of encounter.

## Wednesday

When Mary sets out in haste to share her impossible newness with Elizabeth, we see in even greater detail the extraordinary nature of the strange interruption, the disruption of God's encounter. The rollercoaster of arrival and desertion, fulfillment and abandonment in Mary's story from Annunciation to Visitation is remarkable. From "do not be afraid, the Lord is with you," to "the power of the most high will overshadow you," to "departed from her" to "blessed are you among woman," and "blessed is the fruit of your womb," and "blessed is she who believed." Mary realizes herself, comes to the fullness of herself, through *encounter*—as do we. From the encounter with Gabriel, to the encounter of the Holy Spirit, to the encounter with her beloved cousin, all of life seems to come to fruition: fear, grace, togetherness, aloneness, promise, fulfillment, abandonment, and blessing. And it is through this sort of encounter—where we discover ourselves through encounter with another and with God in another—that we can begin to hear the words: "blessed are you."

That word *blessing* washes over us like a river of delight—just to say it, even quietly to oneself, brings satisfaction, calm, and a sense of release or liberation. I think it's because it is a word of pure generosity and beatitude, from the Latin *beatus*, which means both blessed and *happy*. Blessing is one of those words that makes real what it states—makes the blessedness happen, like an onomatopoeia—a word that comes from the Greek words "name" and "making." *Buzz*, and *sizzle*, and *baa*, and *pitter patter*, and *hiss*, and *roar* make happen the things they name. *Blessing*, even if not in sound, is the onomatopoeia of the world. God, through a process of "name-making" brings into existence everything—makes everything happen by naming it, by blessing it into reality. *Let there be ... the blessed ... and God saw that it was good*. I can hardly imagine a word more purely generous and good than blessing.

So what is Elizabeth calling into existence in Mary? "Blessed" she declares, three times to Mary at the Visitation. What is Elizabeth "name-making" in the life of Mary? Since that first naming and blessing of all things in creation, the good or happy or blessed life has been a gift given and received. The reason blessing leads to praise, the reason true happiness—unshakable joy—isn't the instant and empty gratification of gluttonous and greedy consumer pleasures, but something often disguised in the pain, living beside the darkness, is because it cannot be manufactured or fabricated or "found" (no matter how often cheap Hollywood films persuade us to "find" happiness). True beatitude is *gifted*. This doesn't mean we only passively receive, it doesn't mean we can't pursue that blessedness—Mary's "yes" and Mary's "went with haste" are involved—but even that resounding and hospitable "yes," and even that haste are responses to the gift of God's greeting and presence, the gift of "Welcome, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

Mary goes in haste to receive the blessings of Elizabeth, but she can do so only because of that gift, only because she has been gifted herself, because she has been "name-made" by the blessing of God. Elizabeth is speaking blessing over Mary as if to say, "Mary, I see you now. And you are only blessed. You are all gift."

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ God's blessing is always creative, calling us into being, naming us into ourselves. Until we recognize that all of life, all that we are, is gift, I don't think we can live the life of beatitude, the blessed or happy life. That life of gift, of blessing, also enables us to live in blessing of others. Elizabeth's blessing of Mary moves Mary deeper into herself, into her calling, and enfolds into her great song of praise, the *Magnificat*. Who in your own life has been a carrier of God's blessing, has "name-made" you further into who you are? Give thanks for that encounter, that relationship, that person or people. Give thanks for the gift.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our blessing, through the gift of your very self in Emmanuel, God with us, we are gifted the fullness of life and salvation; teach us how to receive such a gift and in response to live in thankfulness and wonder; through Christ who is both the giver and the gift. Amen.

*[continued on next page]*



“The Visitation” (2017), Ali Cavanaugh

Ali Cavanaugh is an American artist who uses a unique technique she calls “modern fresco,” in which she paints layers of watercolor over wet kaolin clay. In “The Visitation” two women lie next to each other with the tender touch of fingers to palm, reminiscent of classical and renaissance representations of Mary and Elizabeth at the Visitation. But there is a particular focus here. There is nothing of pregnancy or greeting or announcement, there is just a gentle touch and a caring whisper. Whatever is being said, the language of the encounter between these two is clear: “Blessed are you.”

## Thursday

Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, named for the opening word of the song in Latin, has become one of the most important songs and prayers in the history of Christianity (maybe in history, period). It has been prayed and sung down through the centuries of Christianity, and has a particular place of prominence for Anglicans, given our service of choral evensong. When Thomas Cranmer restructured some of the Church's liturgies in sixteenth-century reformation England, he simplified the eight periods of monastic daily prayer and formed two principle offices: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. In his construction of Evening Prayer, Cranmer took the Gospel Canticle from Vespers (prayer in the evening), the *Magnificat*, and that of Compline (or night prayer), the *Nunc Dimittis*—the song of Simeon at Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, in Luke 2, and pressed them into one service. This gave composers an opportunity to compose full services with music for both canticles, and we now have a myriad of breathtaking settings for Choral Evensong, the sung version of Evening Prayer.

Mary's song has not only granted us a plethora of beautiful music, it's been called a pattern for every prayer and every praise of God, and as such, it turns all our prayer, all our praise toward blessing—not only in thanksgiving for God's blessing, but toward the blessing of others.

The *Magnificat* is a song of benediction, a song naming into being the blessing of those who seem beyond blessing. It shows us that true blessing is to be looked upon, just as it is to be called by name. The humble, meek, poor, and disregarded are not blessed simply because they are such, but because of God's regard, because God has "*looked at them* with favor." The blessed life is a life catching God's gaze. And that gaze of God, that life of blessing, is one that scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, and sends away the rich. And in contrast, it raises up the lowly and humble, and fills the hungry and poor. It is the culmination of Mary's movement into herself as the blessed among all, the blessed mother, and the blessed believer of the promise. And in that movement, in Mary's receiving of the blessing of the Spirit, of Gabriel, of Elizabeth, the people of God as a whole find freedom: *He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

In Mary's song of praise, her blessing opens up to all Israel, and in Simeon's in the next chapter of Luke explicitly to the whole world, because God's memory is long and enduring. Wherever we are or have come from, wherever we might stray or go, or however we may struggle in this life, the gaze of God, God's regard of tender beatitude, ensures we are never the forgotten but always the blessed and beloved.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ As we dwell on God's gaze upon us, God's regard and care for us—that we are known and remembered, take a few minutes to listen if you are able to this



beautiful rendition of the *Magnificat* ([song here](#)). The composer is Ēriks Ešenvalds, a Latvian composer born in 1927, and this setting was composed for the Choir of Merton College, Oxford to celebrate the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the college's founding (2014). In my mind Ešenvalds captures the deep severity of Mary's song—the severity of the beauty in all the uncertainty, fear, surprise, and joy that have come from the Annunciation and Visitation, unfolding into God's blessing and rest.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our remembrance, you look forever upon us with delight and mercy; teach us to look upon ourselves and others with the gladness and grace with which you gaze on us and sing your praise for the splendor we find; through Jesus Christ our light and our vision. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“The Visitation” (1640), Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn

In Rembrandt’s “The Visitation,” the deep intimacy between Mary and Elizabeth is evident, the elderly Zechariah is aided down the stairs and much of ordinary life is happening around this moment of miracle and wonder. In the top right-hand corner of the painting, the light of the dawn is gently breaking through the darkness, foreshadowing Zechariah’s song (the *Benedictus*, which we will look at next week) in the midst of Mary’s: “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (The Prophecy of Zechariah, Luke 1:78–79). The tender mercy of our God, the light in the darkness, the way of peace—all in the gaze of God’s blessing; all in the glory of God’s Advent.

## *Friday*

Mary lives out the blessing of her song in real time, that blessing that brings down the proud and powerful and exalts the humble and needy. The *Magnificat*, while in one sense a hymn for all people, maybe even an adaptation of a traditional Jewish hymn, is also in another sense Mary's autobiography. Elizabeth's first blessing in her greeting to Mary: "blessed are you among woman," has a sense of incomparability to it: of *all* the woman, *you* are most blessed. Mary's life exemplifies, makes real, her praise of God "lifting up the lowly." She demonstrates the salvation of God breaking free of all borders, extending beyond the expected, reaching into the darkness, the lowliness—the humility of the lost, the disregarded or forgotten. In other words, Mary's life, her own blessedness, blesses, "name-makes," the blessing of the whole world.

And that blessing is a tearing down of the rich and powerful, the privileged and esteemed, and an exaltation of the humble and poor. So, how is that the blessing of the whole world? How, if some are being brought low, scattered, and sent away empty, is everyone summed up in this blessing of Christ's arrival?

First, because the blessing of the poor *is* the blessing of the whole world. The exaltation of the lowly and the bringing down of the powerful is simply not the way our world works. Christ, reversing the world order, overturning systems and structures of oppression and bringing equity is good for everyone because oppression is not only bad for those who are oppressed, it is bad for the oppressor. They are brought low for their own good, too. Our system that is structured in such a way that the wealthy and powerful continuously gain more wealth and power at the expense of the weak and poor is not just evil in a moralistic or legalistic sense—it's not just that it offends our sense of propriety or wounds our conscience. It is evil because God created us to flourish in love and it works against that flourishing, breeding inequality, hatred, and fear. Subverting that system in the way Mary's song praises God's salvation for doing is good for all involved.

But this is also blessing, beatitude, for the whole world because it demonstrates that God's love and salvation reaches everyone everywhere. No one, no matter how lowly, humble, forgotten or oppressed can ever be beyond God's borderless love in Christ, even if this world finds them impossible to love. And this is the best news we could ever have. The God of the *Magnificat*, the God in the womb of Mary and the manger of Bethlehem, is a God whose love knows no limits—a God with a love that never finds a place, no single dark corner of anywhere on earth that it does not reach.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Mary's blessedness blesses the whole world; it turns outward and beyond herself because the "fruit of her womb" that she bears is the world's salvation. The wonder of this is that we too can become a blessing to others, bearing forth Christ into the world today. This holistic salvation looks like Mary's song—the complete

overturning of the world's oppression, inequality, and injustice, but it begins with our small acts of selfishness turning toward grace, our self-interested aims turning toward the needs of others, our resentment turning toward forgiveness. Because ultimately, the evils of our world, and in contrast its blessing, doesn't come primarily from the halls of power—from the White House or parliaments or international delegations—but from our miniscule daily acts of violence (whether or not that violence is physical), our small thoughts of egotism, and our uneventful and everyday kindness and compassion. Mary's share in the world's redemption was a simple "yes" to the call of God. Pray through the *Magnificat* (printed above on page 3; or listen to another beautiful setting by Herbert Howells [here](#)): what ways in your own life and relationships and in the way you celebrate the holiday season this year can you give your own "yes" to God and share in this life of blessing?

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our salvation, in the sending of our Redeemer the powerful are brought low and the humble are exalted; give us a share in your love and devotion for the oppressed and all those in need, grant us the humility to offer our lives as a gift for their blessing, and in our own need and lowliness embrace us and help us; through the one who became lowly for us and reigns forever in your glory. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“The Visitation” (1941), Romare Bearden

Romare Bearden was born in North Carolina in 1911, though he lived most of his adult life in Harlem, having fled the south in the Great Migration. In “The Visitation” the landscape is an undefined location in the American south. The painting celebrates two African American women living under the oppression of twentieth-century Jim Crow laws. Bearden’s portrayal, which comes across as unique or even experimental in the context of the Western European/American tradition, is of course much closer to the biblical narrative than renaissance and modern portrayals of white women dressed in royal attire, being that there is not a single white person in the entire Bible. Bearden brings the humility of Mary, the exaltation of the lowly and the bringing down of the proud and powerful vividly to life. The advent of God’s liberation entering into a post-emancipation second slavery, Jim Crow, separate but equal American south, and the continuous and unbroken oppression of black people in America that remains ever-present today is vibrant and compelling. It both brings immense hope and horrifying conviction at how we have actively worked against such an advent, the liberation and salvation that Mary sung about so long ago.



## *Saturday*

The *Magnificat* does more than just overturn the destructive systems of our society, however. While it is deeply political and fiercely liberating, it also draws us each in individually with all our particularity. Mary's song is hers alone, bound to her incomparable and unique experience and at the same time all of our song—as her experience, her “yes” that welcomes Christ into the world also makes Christ present to each of us. And we can find ourselves sharing in her uplifting. Mary, the humble and lowly, the insignificant and unknown is known, called out, named, and blessed by God. There are so many parts of our own lives that feel unrecognized, maybe we even feel entirely unknown. Perhaps there are parts of you that seem so low, so base, that they are beyond the reach of God's regard, that gaze of love. Mary's elevation, the lifting up of the lowly that is God's salvation, is on offer to us all. Sometimes learning what it is to be the blessed, being able to recognize ourselves *as blessing*, is just a matter of letting our darkness—our own lowliness, or shame, or fear—become the shadows of the overwhelming light of Christ.

There is also a sense in which we are all the high and mighty who need to be dethroned. We can all find ourselves on the side of the powerful, the rich, and the proud. Because no matter who we are, there are ways in which we sit on the throne of our own lives, think we know what is best for us, pretend that we are in control. And, for our own good, our own beatitude, our happy life of blessing, we must be overthrown from the seats of our own kingdoms and welcome the reign of Christ's redeeming love.

Far too many in the world, due to injustice, inequality, and the greed of others, live the life of humility and poverty, but all of us, through a process of decentring ourselves and welcoming Christ, need to on some level be humiliated and impoverished.

This is what both the life and song of Mary have to teach us. This is what Christ's manger has to teach us. That life of blessedness, the light dispelling our darkness and calling us into ourselves, belongs to those who can recognize this lowly servant of the Lord as “blessed among all.” It belongs to those who can kneel before the infant, lying among the stench of animal waste, exposed to the dark and cold of the night, and say, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ God looks upon us, all of us, every aspect of our being, with unconquerable love. Sometimes the strain we find in our lives around us or in our interactions with others—the lack of forgiveness in our relationships or our frustration with others' faults—exists because we have first been unable to know ourselves as loved and accepted, as forgiven and embraced. Examine your own life, the things that are difficult to look at, and take a few minutes to thank God for looking on every part of you in forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. Whatever our darkness, sin, insecurities, failures, or faults, our self-made thrones are never powerful enough to overcome God's invincible love for us.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our humiliation, you meet us in the depths, from the womb to the manger to the cross of our salvation, that we might be exalted in Christ's majesty; teach us to walk in his humility and to visit both ourselves and others with your mercy and love; through the humiliation of your Word, who speaks redemption to our lowliness. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“The Visitation” (1926), Jacob Epstein

Epstein’s haunting statue was meant to be one of a pair, never completed. He said of this sculpture: “This figure stands with folded hands, and expresses a humility so profound as to shame the beholder who comes to my sculpture expecting rhetoric or splendour of gesture. . . . [it] could also be called ‘Charity’.” A humility that shames the beholder who comes expecting Mary or Elizabeth in grandeur, that could just as easily be called “Charity.” This sculpture is a life-size, physical expression of the Visitation. The charity, the love, the blessing of such a humility that maybe can’t be put fully into words, is shown vividly here. There is a sheer beauty, elegance, even charity, of this deep humility.

***Hope in the Darkness:  
Daily Devotions for Advent 2020***

***The Third Week of Advent  
“The Birth of John the Baptist”***



*Fr Jarred*

# *Sunday*

Each Sunday, join together in the offering of our communal worship through our service of Spiritual Communion at 9.00am here:

<http://www.youtube.com/StPaulsChurchNewburyportMA>, or if you are unable to watch online or prefer to do so through the local television channels: Channel 8 in Newburyport broadcasts on Tuesday at 9:00 am, Thursday at 9:00 am, and Sunday at 10:30 am. Channel 9 in Newbury and Channel 18 in Salisbury broadcast on Wednesday at 9:00 am. Note: On a Monday holiday the Tuesday at 9:00 am service will be the previous week

Take time to rest today, reflect on the Collect for the Sunday (the Collect is a gathering prayer, bringing together our prayer intentions for the day or given theme), and, if you wish, read the Scripture passage for the week: Luke 1:57–80, located on the following page (or you can read this on Monday).

Collect for Advent 3:

*Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.*



### ***The Birth of John the Baptist: Luke 1:57–80***

*Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.*

*On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.*

*Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:*

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.  
He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,  
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,  
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.  
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,  
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.  
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

*The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*

*"Praise the rain,"* by Joy Harjo

Praise the rain; the seagull dive  
The curl of plant, the raven talk—  
Praise the hurt, the house slack  
The stand of trees, the dignity—  
Praise the dark, the moon cradle  
The sky fall, the bear sleep—  
Praise the mist, the warrior name  
The earth eclipse, the fired leap—  
Praise the backwards, upward sky  
The baby cry, the spirit food—  
Praise canoe, the fish rush  
The hole for frog, the upside-down—  
Praise the day, the cloud cup  
The mind flat, forget it all—

Praise crazy. Praise sad.  
Praise the path on which we're led.  
Praise the roads on earth and water.  
Praise the eater and the eaten.  
Praise beginnings; praise the end.  
Praise the song and praise the singer.

Praise the rain; it brings more rain.  
Praise the rain; it brings more rain.

# Monday

The infant John the Baptist is introduced as the fruit of God’s mercy—as born of God’s compassion. The overwhelming joy typically associated with childbirth comes later in Zechariah’s song of blessing, the *Benedictus*, but Luke’s introduction of John, particularly in relation to his mother Elizabeth, is that John is an outpouring of divine benevolence. And it is Elizabeth, as it is Mary, who names her child. Zechariah is in agreement with her but, contrary to the custom of the day, it’s the women who name their children in both instances. And John is blessed into the reality of who he is—called into the mercy of God—when Elizabeth names him: *John*, a name that means “the LORD is gracious.”

This is, of course, the origin of each of us—called, blessed, named from and into God’s mercy. Each one of us proclaim just by our existence: “the LORD is gracious.” Sometimes it is hard to see it, some days and weeks and years feel like curses rather than blessings, but each breath we take at its core speaks to God’s gracious love. And we know this because we are expendable. You are not necessary, nothing ultimately depends upon you (though some things might in a secondary sense), and you are everywhere and in every way dependent. You do not have to be here, none of us *needs* to exist. And this is a good thing. This is wonderful. Because, well, even so, we *do* exist—not essentially, not necessarily, not as a “must,” but as a glorious, unending, unmovable grace. There is no reason for our existence—or the existence of anything at all—other than God in God’s love graced us into life. From God’s perspective we aren’t needed, none of us has to be *us*, but we are—out of sheer gift. We are, all of us, the fruits of God’s mercy.

The story of Elizabeth and John is a beautiful picture of this. The way of salvation, the prophetic pronouncement of “the LORD is gracious,” did not have to be born from Elizabeth’s heartache. Elizabeth’s barrenness was for her a source of shame. As unjust as it is, many would have seen her as cursed. After she conceived she exclaimed, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). God could have prepared the way for Christ’s coming in a different way, but God’s love judges injustice and transforms our shame toward blessing. So, God chooses to open the world up to redemption by turning Elizabeth’s disgrace into miracle. Because John’s existence, John’s very name, defines the nature of the whole world: “the LORD is gracious.”

## *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Our life is pure gift. This doesn’t mean that everything that happens to us is good or desirable, or that everything in our life is as it should be. Nor does it mean that we should think of the pain in our lives as really just disguised blessing—that’s nonsense. Sometimes pain is simply pain—it’s not forever, it doesn’t define everything about us, but there isn’t always a “bright side” or reasonable explanation for it. And it’s OK to just feel it, to know how awful it is, to know it isn’t the way things are supposed to be, and to express to God that pain or anger or frustration or grief. Actually, we can feel liberated to do so because God is who God is; because “the LORD is gracious.” Because God turns Elizabeth’s disgrace into miracle, and meets us in ours too. If there is particular

pain or struggle in your own life right now, freely express it to God and, if you are able, end your prayer by saying these words, as many times as it takes: “The LORD is gracious.”

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our creation, you have made us as the fruits of your love, abide with us now in all our loveliness and unloveliness, our joy and our struggle; that, whatever our lives may bring, we might always know your compassion and rest in your grace; through Christ, both giver and gift of your mercy. Amen.



“The Birth of Saint John the Baptist” (16<sup>th</sup> century), Giuliano Bugiardini

Bugiardini’s portrayal of the Baptist’s birth is distinctive in its acknowledgement of Elizabeth’s naming of John. Zechariah is writing and Elizabeth points to the child and speaks to Zechariah, clearly proclaiming what Zechariah will write to all those concerned: his name is John.

## Tuesday

There is a sense in which at the time of Zechariah and Elizabeth it felt as if the age of God's revelation had come to a close, or at least was put on hold. Zechariah speaks of salvation spoken by the mouth of the "holy prophets of old," and mercy and promise given to ancestors. It was the age of scribes and interpretation, pouring over texts and prophecies "from of old." But now, all of the sudden, after what seemed like generations of silence, salvation is opening up again.

Luke introduces Zechariah and Elizabeth by saying that "both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). To be "righteous" in biblical tradition was to be a space in the world where God breaks in—a way or path for salvation to come. And the story of Zechariah is captivating in this regard. What a path through which salvation arrives.

Zechariah's response, questioning the possibility that John could be born to such aged parents, or at least asking for some sort of evidence of that possibility, is often seen as the antithesis of Mary's response: her resounding "yes" against all odds. But Zechariah does show great faith; he does follow God's call, even if his initial response was less than enthusiastic or a bit unsure. He remains "righteous." He continues to be an opening for God's mercy in the world. And the bends in Zechariah's path show us how being such an opening, living on the fault lines of our broken world and enabling the light to break through, doesn't for a second mean we have to be perfect or have it all together. Zechariah is still a prophet, still proclaiming God's truth into the world, even when he cannot speak.

Luke 1:20 only refers to Zechariah as unable to speak from the time of his meeting of the angel in the sanctuary. But the word used in verse 22 to refer to his disability is ambiguous, and can mean deaf, mute, or both. As the people in verse 62 are motioning to him to see what his son would be called, it is clear that Zechariah cannot hear or speak throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy and until his child is eight days old. First out of Elizabeth's "disgrace" and then out of Zechariah's disbelief and nine-month stretch of no sound or speech comes the name, the word of salvation: *John*, "the LORD is gracious."

These righteous "openings" to God's action and love in the world are so marvellous not because they were perfect or without vulnerability, not because they didn't make mistakes or weren't counted as lost causes, and not even in spite of these things, but *through* them. The imperfections are a part of their story, a part of that opening of God's salvation. Out of "dis-grace" brings forth the very grace of God, the silent and speechless prophecies the redemption of the world. As openings to God's presence among us through their vulnerabilities and weakness, they open the way for us, whatever our own faults and frailties, to welcome that presence too.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ What ways in your own life can you become an "opening" for God's salvation in the world around you? What about your closest relationships? Those who are in need? Those who are difficult to love or who need your forgiveness? And what about with yourself? Are there parts of yourself you try to hide, even from God;



aspects of yourself that feel like closed doors to grace and love? Just as God broke through Elizabeth and Zechariah's feebleness, those parts of ourselves can be opened up and become avenues for God's mercy. Offer to God the things that feel like closed doors in your life—be they inward or outward relationships—making them places of welcome rather than exclusion.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our vulnerabilities, in Christ you entered our world through humility and weakness, transforming ours into windows of your grace; help us, help us, help us. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“Zacharias (?) and the Angel” (c. 1635), Rembrandt

Rembrandt’s quintessential focus on the raw emotion of his subjects is evident in his sketch of (probably) Zechariah and the angel in the temple. You can see Zechariah’s questioning of the angel’s message in his eyes and hand gesture. The view from below shows the angel in a heightened position over him, and the angel’s gesture (hardly recognizable from so many revisions) is a corrective one, calling Zechariah out for not trusting the word of God. But Zechariah’s slowness to respond is no hindrance to the coming salvation; even that pointed finger comes with grace.

## Wednesday

Before Zechariah was freed from his silence, he was already full of praise at the birth of John, running, scrambling for paper and pen to scribble in haste: “the LORD is gracious ... his name is John.” He doesn’t praise God for restoring his hearing and speech. His praise is for the salvation of his people. A praise that could not be clearer in his prophetic song, the *Benedictus*.

The *Benedictus*’s name is taken from its first word in Latin, meaning *blessed* or *worthy of praise*. It has long been a canticle sung as part of Lauds, prayers in the early morning, and is the main canticle for Morning Prayer in Anglican tradition. In the narratives of the Annunciation and Visitation we learn a lot about what it means to be blessed by God, but what does it mean for God to be the blessed? “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has visited and redeemed his people,” Zechariah proclaims. The Greek word here used for “blessed” occurs eight times in the New Testament and is only used in reference to God. The kind of blessing God gifts to us—that blessing that makes us who we are, that names us, and transforms us by changing our relationship to God and others, is different from the blessing Zechariah professes for God, or that we find, for example, at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In this blessing, rather than moving into ourselves, we are coming to the end of ourselves, and we left with nothing else but *praise*. There is a line in the *Benedictus* that we might say a thousand times before ever thinking about it: “*to give knowledge of salvation unto his people.*” Through the birth of John who prepares the way for Christ’s coming, not only does salvation arrive, but *knowledge* of it. Knowledge in Hebrew tradition was not just about cognitive understanding but a way of life. It was about *wisdom*. And often took on imagery of a journey or path. This is a knowledge that moves us somewhere, that changes us. As Zechariah has it, it “guides our feet into the way of peace.”

This knowledge has nowhere else to go but praise. St Augustine opens his magisterial work, *Confessions*, speaking of knowledge and praise. We are made to know God, he says, but God is infinitely beyond our grasp. So, when we come to the end of our knowing, when our human finite minds are exhausted, then the real seeking, the true journey of knowledge and wisdom can begin, and we reach out beyond ourselves in knowledge that turns to sheer praise. There is a sense of this praise in Joy Harjo’s poem above. Not only, she says, praise the things we know and know to be blessings, but, “Praise the hurt, the house slack ... Praise crazy. Praise sad ... Praise the path on which we’re led.” Harjo opens up not only the unexpected (house slack, crazy, sad) to praise, but the completely unknown (the past on which we’re led).

We can sense this in Zechariah’s song. The great epiphany, the revelation of God’s salvation brings a deep knowledge that is beyond our comprehension, beyond what we can “know” in the everyday sense of knowledge. All that is left at such heights is wonder, bewilderment; all that is left is praise: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who has visited and redeemed his people.”

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ When have you found yourself at the end of yourself, at the end of your knowledge or understanding, where you could only turn to praise? We all come to places where the overwhelmed-ness of life leaves us without explanation—it could be in love, in loss, in the beauty of nature or music or art, or holding the hand of one's child. These experiences are inexplicable, they cannot be put under a microscope, examined, or tied up neatly. This gives us a taste of praise. God is met everywhere, but profoundly and vividly in these places of our life. Consider these times in your own life, offer them to God in prayer. If you'd like, use Zechariah's: "Blessed be the Lord."

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our praise, you are forever beyond us yet always among us; lead us in the knowledge of your salvation, that our knowing might rise to praising; through Christ the dawn from on high breaking upon us, guiding our feet into the way of peace. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*





“The Naming of John the Baptist” (1435), Fra Angelico

I find Zachariah in Fra Angelico’s portrayal of the naming of John the Baptist very moving. Though John has already been named by Elizabeth, which Fra Angelico seems to miss. Zachariah’s face is strained as he writes, as if, not only speaking but even writing down the graciousness of God in the name of his son takes great effort—or perhaps he himself is so moved by grace that he struggles to get the words out.



## Thursday

Zechariah's song of praise, his "blessed be God," is oriented both toward the past and the future. Hope comes both from where we've come from and where we are headed. God's covenant, made with Zechariah's ancestors, makes him who he is, shapes his identity, as he seeks to live into it. Then, the song turns to John: "You child will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." The realization of what is happening with John in the present cannot be divorced from the people's history, and neither can future hope.

And it is remarkable and telling that Zechariah's praise of God can't be separated from the real-world, tangible, present and past experience, or even from the honor of his son, John. The connections of blessing with praise, and the knowledge of God with the nature of one's own story is striking. So many aspects of Zechariah's past and present were bleak, but they defined him: from the people, the history, to those present with him rejoicing at the birth of John and in awe of Zechariah's new-found speech. In all of it, the story of salvation "from of old" becomes the dawn that is breaking. And it isn't written in a book or taught in a lecture, it is *sung*. It is known, truly known, only in praise.

Our own story is no different. It's part of something bigger, something deeper. From the overarching narratives that define us—be they cultural, religious, familial—to small encounters that change us in profound ways. One of our strongest, and perhaps most dangerous, modern myths is that we are purely individuals. We are certainly individuals. The name *John* enables this child to have his own identity, but it also enables him to relate to others and have his identity formed and shaped by them. But we often forget the significance of that latter point. The modern American consciousness is driven perhaps more than anything else by the idea that the only inherent or absolute good is self-determining free will—to make my own choices how I wish (which is almost always embarrassingly and pitifully mistaken for *freedom*). But we forget that none of us exists in a historical vacuum, we are not "blank slates" on which we write our own destiny. Our entire lives, our very selves, are *gifted* to us, ultimately by God but also by our families, our histories, our education, our broader cultural norms, language, our experiences and encounters, our relationships. None of us lives as a pure individual, none of us is making blank-slate choices—we are enabled to even begin to consider certain choices and not others, particular directions in life and not others, because we are first gifted into ourselves, and we continue to be.

And this isn't a bad thing, it is not constricting our identity but broadening it, opening us up to more of ourselves. Yes, it places restrictions on us, but when we realize those restrictions, and that we have been shaped into who we are by so many endless factors in our lives, we are then able to move within and sometimes beyond them. And Zechariah here is able to wrestle with his own inherited identity, his own shared story, and to see how it is opening up in a new way, to see the radical in-breaking of the dawn that is coming, because he isn't bound by the restrictive notion that he is purely his own. It isn't "Blessed be the Lord the God of *me*." He realizes that God is not known on one's own, and praise of God is all mixed up with human relationships, conflict and reconciliation, promise and struggle and hope and endurance. His praise is praise with

the whole people of God. And ours is too, if it is to be genuine praise of God and not ourselves.

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ We have been kept from gathering together to praise God as a community for some time. This is painful not just because we miss seeing people, but because we miss the fullness of our praise. But that fullness is expressed in our own personal song as well—a song, a praise, that includes within it all the interconnectedness with others that makes us who we are. Take a few minutes today to praise God for the encounters of your life that have defined you—some will be joyful, some painful or sorrowful—but they are nevertheless *yours* and they in many ways define you. Offer your history to God, give thanks for it, and offer praise for the promise of our future hope in Christ.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our history, you have met us and formed us through the stories we inherit; as we seek to move forward and build upon them, show us ourselves in the midst of your story of salvation, the story of everything; that we may, as John, prepare the way of salvation for others; through Christ, God with us, yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“Zacharias and Elizabeth” (1913–14), Stanley Spencer

Stanley Spencer’s work always draws me in. There is so much going on, but with such simplicity. Here, in one of his earliest works which he painted at 22 years old, Zechariah is in the front of the scene with tongs over a fire. Eerily lurking behind him is the angel coming to deliver the message that will take away his speech and hearing. There is an unidentified woman kneeling on the other side of the curvy wall that splits the scene. Elizabeth is shown with half of her body above the wall, and again in the back of the scene with arms outstretched to a second Zechariah. Behind her, a gardener, painted in a style that both John the Baptist and Christ are often pictured, dragging a leafy branch, a symbol of resurrection and new life. Salvation seems to follow Elizabeth in one scene and make a path for her to follow in another. The scene is set, of course, in the landscape of Spencer’s hometown of Cookham, England, making that salvation present in his own time and place.

## *Friday*

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Zechariah's prophetic song closes by picturing the mercy of God, that mercy that calls us into being, the mercy from which we are made, as the light of the dawn breaking over us, enabling us, even when we sit in the darkness, even when death overshadows us, to *see*. The Christian life is about vision. In following Christ, we are learning to see.

The reason Christ is called the light of the world, the reason the imagery of light and darkness is so prevalent in Scripture is because when we are in darkness, when there is no light, we can't see where we are or where we are going (it's, of course, a spiritual, not physical, blindness or lack of vision that carries this negative connotation in Scripture). And with the coming of Christ, when our eyes begin to adjust again as the light breaks upon us, the path for our feet to walk in, is peace.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas have a lot to say about peace; about the pursuit of peace, awaiting peace, Christ as the Prince of Peace, about peace coming to earth in the person of Jesus, and so on. There is a washed out and watered-down version of this peace that pops up in Christian circles. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Col. 3:15) becomes a sort of cheap self-help refrain. But Christ's peace is not primarily about feeling a certain sense of calm, or thinking that everything is going to be OK, or being free of worry. Trusting in God's promises, not being overwhelmed by anxiety over things that are out of our hands but God has well in control, are certainly involved in the peace Christ brings. But Christ's reign of peace, first and foremost, is reflected in our relationships with others, and, as Jesus himself reminds us a few chapters later in Luke's Gospel, it's about good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18).

So, for our feet to be guided by the light on the way of peace, our path must be one of peacemaking—of forgiveness, justice, equality, and love. This, of course, *does* also bring a deeper sense of inner peace, not because we always feel at ease, or happy, or fulfilled, but because when we refuse to engage in the zero-sum games of our world—where the freedom of some is defined by the captivity of others, the wealth of some ensures the poverty of others—we can begin that process of learning to see. We can begin to see the world as Christ sees to world; begin to see others—and ourselves—with the mercy, the tenderness, and the graciousness of God. That's the thing about light, it doesn't just shine, it illuminates everything around it.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ All of us at times sit in the darkness. All of us at times are in the shadow of death. Some people spend entire lifetimes there. Walking on the way of peace, following where the Light leads us, means we are learning to see them, and ourselves, in God's tender mercy and without judgement. It is easy sometimes to think about the major injustices of our world and how the call of the way of



peace confronts them, but what about our own daily lives? Think about the parts of yourself and those you love most that might be difficult to bring into the light. Offer them to God in prayer and consider what walking in the way of peace means for them.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our vision, your light breaks upon us and trains our eyes to see; lead us in your path of peace, that your way may be known upon earth, your salvation among all nations; through Christ, the light of your tender mercy. Amen.



“Birth of Saint John the Baptist” (1670s), Giordano Luca

In Giordano Luca’s painting of John the Baptist’s birth the striking feature is not John or Elizabeth or Zechariah or Mary, it is *light*. The “dawn from on high” is breaking upon the scene and everyone, from nurses and visitors to father and mother to baby, are bathed in it. The light draws our eyes to the center of the painting, the baby who prepares the way, who welcomes in the light of the world, but *everything* is illuminated.

## *Saturday*

*The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.*

Following the *Benedictus*, we get a single line about John before he comes on the scene as an adult and we hear that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Luke 3:2). The joyous shout of salvation that comes at John’s birth seems to lead to only more waiting. This one who prepares the way of Christ, who was “filled with the Holy Spirit, even in his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15), grows up, goes into the wilderness, and it is years and years before his life as a prophet, as the preparer, begins.

And as the word of God came to Elizabeth in what was counted as her disgrace, and to Zechariah in his isolation, fear, and great silence, so it now comes to John in the midst of the wilderness. Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3–5 in reference to John: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” John is the prophetic voice preparing the world for the light that is to come, but he is so from the wilderness. He is so identified with the wilderness that he can simply be known as “the wilderness one,” and so identified with his message that he is “the voice crying out”—not, he has a voice, he *is* the voice in the wilderness.

John the Baptist’s life is so intertwined with the story of Jesus that he can only be known or understood, even thought of, in relation to Christ. And John knew this of himself as well: “Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29–30). For John, the increase of Christ and the decrease of himself—welcoming Christ as a practice of self-denial, is not only essential, it is his *joy*. This from the one who lives the life of the wilderness.

Too often we find ourselves believing that we are the center of our story, that we must constantly and in every conceivable way continue to increase, increase, increase if we are to survive. And there is no joy there, only exhaustion and pressure and disappointment. John shows us what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus, and what it looks like to be able to prepare others, to bring others along to the wondrous love of Christ. We have to let go of the pretence that we are the single most significant person in our lives. And this isn’t to think poorly of ourselves or devalue ourselves. It’s the opposite, actually. It is to realize ourselves for who we are: the fruits of God’s mercy, gifts of God’s graciousness. Just before John makes his glorious statement that he must decrease and Christ must increase, he says this: “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given them from heaven.” And here, when we know ourselves to be pure gift, can we join John to say: “this joy of mine is now complete.”

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ It seems in a way illogical that turning outward away from ourselves and living toward another is where we find joy, but this is the sometimes-inexplicable poetry of life. But it is also entirely coherent given the God who loved us into existence. We come from, we are made out of, God’s self-giving love. And as



such, magnifying that love, turning outward toward another, Christ increasing as we decrease, is our most natural state. It is living as most authentically ourselves. Are there aspects of your life where you find the need to assert yourself, to make sure you are recognized, to ensure that others notice you and how important you are? We all have spaces like this in our lives. And there is certainly nothing wrong with giving credit where credit is due, encouraging and acknowledging others' efforts and achievements, and also finding fulfillment in our own. It is more about what we are after, what we're seeking: the increase of Christ's love and peace in our lives and world or the increase of our own agenda? Take a few minutes of prayer to join in John the Baptist's words: "Jesus, make my joy complete: you must increase, and I must decrease."

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our joy, our lives and all that we have are gifts from you; help us to know ourselves as gifts to ourselves and to others, and live lives of offering that make your gifts known; through Christ our eternal increase, our complete joy. Amen.

*[continues on next page]*



“Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness” (2013), Kehinde Wiley (left);  
“Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness” (1660s), probably Bartolomé Esteban  
Murillo (right)

Kehinde Wiley said in an interview, “Painting is about the world we live in. Black people live in the world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us.” Wiley paints black figures into positions of power, beauty, and importance, particularly by placing them into the canon of western art. It’s an extraordinary project of both beauty and protest, conviction and hope. Here a black woman poses as Murillo’s seventeenth-century John the Baptist. Wiley’s work is prophetic and calls us into the way of peace the *Benedictus* proclaims.

***Hope in the Darkness:  
Daily Devotions for Advent 2020***

***The Fourth Week of Advent  
“The Journey to Bethlehem”***



*Fr Jarred*

# ***Sunday***

Each Sunday, join together in the offering of our communal worship through our service of Spiritual Communion at 9.00am here:

<http://www.youtube.com/StPaulsChurchNewburyportMA>, or if you are unable to watch online or prefer to do so through the local television channels: Channel 8 in Newburyport broadcasts on Tuesday at 9:00 am, Thursday at 9:00 am, and Sunday at 10:30 am. Channel 9 in Newbury and Channel 18 in Salisbury broadcast on Wednesday at 9:00 am. Note: On a Monday holiday the Tuesday at 9:00 am service will be the previous week

Take time to rest today, reflect on the Collect for the Sunday (the Collect is a gathering prayer, bringing together our prayer intentions for the day or given theme), and, if you wish, read the Scripture passage for the week: Matthew 1:18–25, Luke 2:1–6, and Mark 1:1, located on the following page (or you can read this on Monday).

Collect for Advent 4:

*Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*



## **The Birth of Jesus**

**Matthew 1:18–25.** Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

**Luke 2:1–6.** In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

**Mark 1:1.** The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God...

“Joseph and the Angel,” by Rachel Mann

In a room, perhaps. Saw and bench,  
plane and chisel, the tools of the trade.

But – to his delight – a boy again,  
trees still to be climbed,

not yet caring what’s a mattock, what’s a yoke,  
opening a window, just to let the bright elsewhere in.

All this time, the visitor’s words,  
insistent, the hum of bees brought indoors,

one question again and again:  
*Do you understand?*

Knowing he should speak,  
marvelling at the cleanliness

of his new-made hands.



## Monday

The journey to Bethlehem, to the birth of our salvation, begins with Mary's Annunciation (the focus of the first week of Advent devotions), but there is another annunciation of sorts—the one to Joseph. Matthew's Gospel brings our attention to Joseph, first with the genealogy of Jesus at the opening of the Gospel and then with the announcement, well, really the clarification about Jesus' birth.

Mary had become pregnant, to Joseph's surprise. Mary and Joseph were engaged, but betrothal at the time had the force of marriage. The only way out, in fact, was divorce, and if the betrothed husband died during the betrothal period the wife was considered a widow. The punishment for adultery (including in the betrothal period) was stoning to death. It was actually rare at the time for this punishment to be enacted, but still, a woman who had been divorced from her betrothed because of adultery would have been outcast for the remainder of her life, with no livelihood. As one would sadly expect, this only went one way—shame for a man is much harder to come by.

In Matthew's description, however, Joseph is only once introduced in his own right. He is a *just* man, Matthew writes (1:19) and wanted no harm or shame to come to Mary so was going to keep everything quiet for her protection. All other identifying characteristics of Matthew's Joseph are based on his relationship to Mary: Joseph is "the husband of Mary" (1:16), the one betrothed to Mary (1:18), and again referred to as "her husband" (1:19). Even the descriptor of "just" is in relation to his treatment of Mary. Joseph is the man behind the woman (so much for traditional family values!).

As a "just" or "righteous" man (the same word in Greek), he is a space where God's presence opens up into the world—just as Elizabeth and Zechariah were (see week three's devotions). And it is Joseph's openness to be that space and nothing else that marks him out and prepares him to take part in the welcome of Emmanuel, God with us. In Mann's striking portrayal in her poem above, the carpenter Joseph marvels at "new-made hands," a new childhood, himself made anew for another type of work. And that beautiful line: *opening a window, just to let the bright elsewhere in*. Joseph's encounter has enlightened new spaces in his life, created new openings and possibilities. Now, he must move, get on with that work of new-made hands. Now, he must journey on to Bethlehem.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Sometimes we think that to be effective in the movement of Christ in the world we need to be a particular type of person or have particular gifts or talents. Sometimes, even, this might be a source of guilt or shame—why aren't I doing more? Why have I accomplished so little? But Joseph is definitively ordinary, and only ever even recognized in relation to others—particularly Mary and later Jesus. His saintliness is found not in incredible feats he accomplished in the name of Christ but in faithful and sustained openness to the movement of God in his life. Take a moment to be still and present before God in silent prayer and make yourself open, let your guard down that you might be conscious of God's

presence. What aspects of yourself become present to your mind and prayer? Are these things where doors are closed to God or where your guard is up against God's love?

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our illumination, your light reveals the unknown and the hidden; open the guarded and defended parts of ourselves that we might offer our whole selves to you and, being truly known also to ourselves, may serve you without fear; through Christ who enlightens everyone and is coming into the world. Amen.



“The Anxiety of Saint Joseph” (1896–94), James Tissot

In Tissot's portrayal of St Joseph, he is lost in thought, unable to work with curls of shaved wood lying around his carpenter's shop. Having heard of Mary's pregnancy, he gazes off into the distance and catches women walking past carrying water—surely waiting, longing, to catch Mary approaching, maybe wondering as each figure approaches in the distance if it will be her. He leans on his worktable almost as if he's unable to stand, and with complete disregard for his surroundings.

## *Tuesday*

Joseph goes essentially unnoticed in the story, and he is ultimately unnecessary—he is there as a support for Mary and Jesus but remains in the shadows. He becomes a crucial character, however, in his just and righteous treatment of Mary, his tender support of her, and in his fathering of Jesus, even as he remains hidden and unknown. Joseph is definitively ordinary; background noise in the life of Jesus. He doesn't even get a speaking role—not a single line. He doesn't need one—he is just open, welcoming, and generously unguarded to the voice of God.

Joseph's unguarded openness to God is a beautiful example to us because it is not a passive reception. It's an active, moving, acceptance of who he truly is. The angel in Joseph's dream announces to Joseph the story he is a part of and speaks him into himself. He is Joseph, son of David, husband of Mary, fatherly guide of the Life of the world. And his unguardedness before God tears down his guard before others as well—opening him up to Mary in unconditional love, going against every cultural norm and expectation in doing so.

In response to Joseph's encounter with God, he learns to welcome and receive others in receiving the grace and call God gives him. His openness to receive God's gift opens up into gifts for others. And in particular to the defenceless and helpless. Joseph is the ordinary, unassuming figure who—simply through an unguarded attentiveness to God—comes to honor, esteem, and dignify a vulnerable woman in a world bent on suppression and violence against women (a world not unfamiliar to us even today) and soon to carry a young family to safety as political refugees. Joseph doesn't revolutionize the world through uprising or revolt but through simple kindness and unguarded devotion. It's a path we are all called to, and one we can all follow as we live in reception of God's word and response to God's encounter.

### *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Joseph sits in the shadows of the story of Jesus, but it is precisely because of this that he plays such a significant role. Joseph, like all of us, is known in relation to others. Our identities are shaped by our encounters and experiences in community with other people, and Joseph is just and righteousness not because of personal piety or inner purity—the text gives us nothing about his inner life, nor does it indicate that he was a great theologian or spiritual teacher—but because in those encounters and experiences with others he recognizes and uplifts their dignity. Think about your own relationships and encounters with others, how have other people through their love for you cultivated your dignity? How can you exalt and acknowledge the dignity of others in your life, both those closest to you, and, in particular, those in great need—those whose dignity the world attempts to suppress?

### *Prayer for the Day:*

God of our ordinary, in coming among us as one of us you esteem and dignify us and call us to recognize and honor the dignity of others; reveal your glory to us in one another and help us receive it with awe; through Christ both glory of heaven and dust of the earth. Amen.





“Adoration of the Christ Child by Mary and Joseph” (early 16<sup>th</sup> c.), Master of the Greenville Tondo

This early 16<sup>th</sup> century depiction of Mary and Joseph’s adoration of the Christ Child is a remarkably tender painting, and particularly of Joseph. Mary is serene, regal, and in prayer to Christ. Joseph is slouched and in awe with his hand touching his heart—a prayer if there’s ever been one. There is a genuine sense of encounter with God, of wonder, that is captured in this portrayal of Joseph. Another tender moment in the painting is the angels behind Mary and Joseph (and in the very center of the frame) resting into one another as if siblings. The angel on Joseph’s side seems to mimic his overwhelmed-ness—she is taken aback by it all. The one on Mary’s side mimics her tranquil devotion. The devotion of Mary and Joseph on earth is directly paralleled in the worship of heaven.

## Wednesday

Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 80 miles, and presumably longer given their circumstances. Between the two towns lies Samaria, a place that did not have friendly relations with the Jewish people, and which was probably avoided on the journey. The terrain is not always friendly either, and, presuming they had to bring things along on the back of a donkey, the journey would have taken much longer than a straight walk—perhaps seven to ten days (and that's before factors of Mary's pregnancy, including potentially morning sickness, are taken into account).

The current journey is a couple of hours by car down Highway Route 6, but still division among people intensifies and lengthens the voyage. Route 6 carefully hugs the western border of the West Bank, careful not to stray east too far. And more, Bethlehem, just about six miles south of Jerusalem, lies over the border. Mary and Joseph's journey today would be next to impossible. Bethlehem in Palestine is squeezed on all sides by expanding Israeli settlements and the Israeli West Bank barrier (a wall that stands over 26 feet high) divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

The birthplace of the Prince of Peace has long been marked by violence, upheaval, conquest, and unrest. And it was, of course, in the time of Christ's birth as well. Perhaps not so systematically as today, there was a general time of peace throughout the empire, but it was peace constantly under threat, constantly on the brink of breaking into turmoil, as the story of the Holy Innocents following the birth of Christ makes clear (Matthew 2:13–18). Mary and Joseph are making the journey because the emperor wishes to expand power and influence by taking a census to build up his tax revenue and, as is usual in our world, the weak and vulnerable are abused for the gain of the rich and powerful. Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, is already taking shape in the life of Jesus.

And it is taking shape in the midst of great risk. Pregnancy and childbirth in themselves are a great risk in Mary's circumstances, time, and place, but even more so when such a dangerous journey is involved which, presumably, Mary took twice. Elizabeth, whom Mary already visited, didn't live in Bethlehem but not far away just outside Jerusalem in the Judean hill country (with its often steep and difficult climbs). Already in Mary's womb, God in Christ enters into the great risk of humanity. Yes, we can speak about divine providence and God's plan not being thwarted with hindsight, but for Mary and Joseph on this journey, I seriously doubt that theological arguments settled their fears and anxiety.

Following Jesus, trusting God's call upon us and direction in our lives, does not mean we won't have doubts and struggles; it doesn't preclude any worries in this life. Yes, Jesus encourages us, "do not worry about your life" (Matt. 6:25) and we are told continuously throughout the season of Advent "do not be afraid" (some form of this phrase is actually the most repeated appeal in the whole Bible), but we are also met by Christ *in the midst* of our fears and worries—here in the journey to Bethlehem, and throughout Christ's life as he gives rest to the weary and burdened (Matt. 11:28).

Scripture imploring us to not be afraid, to cast aside our worry and anxiety, is not meant to be a guilt-inducing command—something to either succeed at and feel good about or to fail and be brought into shame. It is rather an *invitation*: “Yes, I know,” Christ says to us, “I know this life is hard, I’ve been there. I know sometimes you might feel out of control, and that can be frightful, I lived in this out-of-control world, too. It’s OK, lean into me. I am with you, do not be afraid.”

*Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ All of our journeys are marked with moments, seasons even, of risk—even turmoil at times and a lack of peace. Sometimes it might be all we can do just to hold it together. And those time can be fearful and infused with anxiety. It would be inhumane to pretend that the anxiety and fear aren’t real, and I think just as inhumane to pretend it is possible for us to live entirely outside them. And Christ, the Prince of Peace, comes to us as an invitation into rest and comfort, not as a litmus test for how pure our faith or trust in God is—as if we fail or have incomplete trust if doubt is mixed in. The call is to keep moving toward Bethlehem, keep going to meet Christ among us, even in the midst of times that feel they will break us. And sometimes even that call is too much to ask, and that’s OK, too. That’s why the way of Christ is always communal. Sometimes others need to carry us, or sit with us for a while on the wilderness journey. Take a moment to thank God for those who have carried you or sat beside you. Who in your life could you sit beside?

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our weariness, in Christ you lived deeply into the pressures of this life; in your mercy, meet us there now and console us; through the one who wept and grieved and suffered. Amen.





“The Road to Bethlehem” (1894), Fritz von Uhde

Fritz von Uhde’s painting of Mary and Joseph journeying to Bethlehem vividly brings the scene to life. They are on foot, Mary is noticeably weary, leaning on Joseph as he supports her and gazes down at her in great concern. Joseph encapsulates here the kind of companionship we need to make the long and sometimes difficult journey to Christ in Bethlehem. It is also a scene of great poverty—their clothing and their lack of possessions or resources all indicate this. We are reminded that this is the world into which Christ was born.

# Thursday

*Providence ... has granted us and those who will come after us a Saviour who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in peaceful order ... with the result that the birthday of our God signalled the beginning of Good News for the world.*

This statement, as presented here, could be biblical. It was, however, spoken not of Christ's arrival, but that of Caesar Augustus. Augustus (born Gaius Octavius) was the first emperor of the Roman Empire after the long sustained Roman Republic (509 BC – 27 BC) came to a close. He reigned from 27 BC to 14 AD, and the above inscription is part of the "Priene Calendar inscription." It was found on two stones in the market place in Priene, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) and dates to about 9 BC.

The word for "Good News," or "Glad Tidings," *euangelion*—where we get our word "gospel," was used at the time of Christ to announce the coming of a new kingdom of peace when a king had won victory in war. All those conquered who surrendered and pledged allegiance to this king would receive "salvation" from destruction.

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).* Mark's herald of salvation, of the "Good News" of Christ's coming, is cast in the same standard format as the heralding of a kingdom, and this would have been familiar to readers. But this Messiah is different. He's no warrior, he possesses no army, he has no prestige, no seat of power, and the original herald, in fact, is only to a few poor shepherds. They too, then, journey to Bethlehem, frantically checking every barn and stable for the sign of this Messiah: not a victorious battle, but a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a feeding trough meant for oxen and sheep on the outskirts of a tiny insignificant town.

The "good news," the "glad tidings" of this Savior, is heralded by angels but revealed in the lowly manger. It's the meeting of heaven and earth. But even more, in all its ultimate particularity and wonder, it is also a birth like any other. Mary labors in pain and Christ emerges wet and sticky and screaming. Jesus, this promised redeemer sent from heaven, is so much one of us. The most extraordinary event imaginable in the history of histories, the light shining in the darkness, is so mundane and ordinary: a child is born to a laboring mother, and the world is redeemed.

To journey toward Bethlehem, to join the shepherds and "go and see this thing that has happened," is to go to *that* Bethlehem. Christmas Day is tomorrow, and to celebrate Christmas well, to prepare our hearts now in this time of Advent, is to be able to show up there in Bethlehem with the shepherds; to be able to kneel before the frail, dependent, vulnerable infant in a manger and rejoice at Emmanuel—to know that there, right there, in that glorious humility: God is with us.

## *Notes for Reflection:*

- ◆ Today we prepare our hearts to welcome our redeemer. This year, perhaps more than other years for many of us, things might be a bit slower and calmer. There might be more space to reflect on this great appearing of God among us in the manger of Christ. Take a few minutes and offer thanksgiving to God for coming

among us in Christ in the most mundane and ordinary, for meeting us where we are, and for coming to us in the depths of our human existence—our poverty, our vulnerability, our weakness. If God is there, even in the manger of Bethlehem, there is no place God’s love does not reach.

*Prayer for the Day:*

God of our glad tidings, in the ordinary yet glorious birth of Christ heaven has stooped to earth and earth is raised to heaven: Thank you.



“Nativity” (2006), Brian Kershisnik

Kershisnik’s painting “Nativity” is remarkable. For a start, is “nativity” not “*the* nativity.” It is a birth like any other. The angels lean in (including a tiny baby angel peering over the headboard just above Mary’s head!), their entire existence is drawn in like a magnet (amusingly, no one can see them except the dog). Midwives wait on Mary, but the most striking figure in the painting is certainly Joseph. He is giving us an actual face-palm, as if to say, “what have I done ... what have I gotten myself into?” It is a perplexing portrayal of Joseph—and a humorous one, until you see his left hand reaching over and resting on Mary’s shoulder. It’s a brutally and beautifully honest picture of emotions that are so real and human. We can all identify with Joseph here as he is pulled in different directions and doesn’t know what to think. But he’s there—hand on the shoulder and all. No matter where his emotions are pulling him, and however undeniable and real they are, he is all in with no turning back.