

Silent Retreat: Advent

*"O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption."*

- Psalm 130:7

Beginning

Take some time to start the day in prayer. Ask God to help you to be open to whatever He might have for you this day. Share with God any hopes, fears, questions, or doubts that are on your mind. Throughout the day you may find it helpful to come back to God on a "meta" level: why do I resist this topic or find particular delight in this verse? But if you are having a sweet time of fellowship with the Lord, do not feel obligated to interrupt it with such thoughts!

(More suggestions for Entering In to the retreat are included in the appendix. All the materials here are merely prompts—take up what is helpful and disregard the rest.)

Invocation

How long, O Lord, must we suffer under evil and darkness? Shine your light on me this day, that my life would point to your coming glory, by which the world will be healed and your people set free through Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. Amen.

- From *Living the Christian Year* by Bobby Gross

Scripture Readings

from the NIV

Psalm 130

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;

² O Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,

Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,

so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,

and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord

more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,

for with the Lord is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel

from all their sins.

John 1:1-18

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Other Readings

Evil can be cast out, not by man alone nor by a dictatorial God who invades our lives but when we open the door and invite God through Christ to enter. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.' God is too courteous to break open the door, but when we open it in faith believing, a divine and human confrontation will transform our sin-ruined lives into radiant personalities.

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Faith is the opening of all sides and at every level of one's life to the divine inflow.

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This faith transforms the whirlwind of despair into a warm and revising breeze of hope. The words of a motto that a generation ago was commonly found on the wall in the homes of devout persons needs to be etched on our hearts:

Fear knocked at the door.
Faith answered.
There was no one there.

- From *Strength to Love* by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Themes for Reflection

As you read, reflect, write, and pray, remember to pause, wait, and sit still along the way. The stillness may be the most important part of all.

You may wish to start by reading Luke chapters 1 and 2 to get into the spirit of Advent.

Choose one or more of the following to guide your day (see also the Appendix).

What do you ponder in your heart?

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

One of my favorite verses from the birth narrative is Luke 2:19. Everyone was amazed at what they heard from the shepherds, “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

What do you treasure up and ponder in your heart? Spend some time pondering those things with God.

- Verses given at special occasions (dedication / confirmation / baptism / wedding)
- Particular prayers or prophecy someone has spoken over you that stick with you
- Passages of scripture that keep coming back to you in your journey
- Truths God has taught you that you hold on to
- Unfulfilled promises you long for
- Truths or promises God has highlighted to you that you may not fully understand
- “Life verses” you come back to

Hope

The theme of the first week of Advent is Hope. Two weeks ago Jean preached on hope based on James 4:13-17. (Go ahead and read James 4:13-17)

Jean described two paths in this short passage: “the merchant’s path” and “the Lord’s path.”

The merchants, though Christians, were behaving as functional atheists: they were planning as if God did not exist. But we are but a mist; we do not even know if we will be here tomorrow. We cannot control outcomes, and even our successes will not outlast this lifetime. This path brings no guarantees and empty boasting in ourselves, which is not a place of hope.

The alternative is to take the Lord's path. This is not merely a matter of saying the phrase "if the Lord wills" or asking God to put his stamp of approval on the plans we have already devised. Instead we must pray and ask God, who is both sovereign and loving, what he would have us do. It means being open to changes God may guide us into. Ask Joseph what that looks like! (see Matthew 1:18-23)

- What are some plans you have for different areas of your life?
- Do your plans feel like a burden or a gift?
- Do you live with fear that the plans may not come about, whether through your own failings or due to variables outside your control?

God invites us to lose our lives in order to gain them. Share your plans and dreams with God, and ask Him to help you perceive what He has for you. Embrace the freedom that comes from knowing that His presence now and forever is guaranteed to those ask, and that our hope is well-placed in Him.

Faith

On Sunday Larry talked about how we cannot go straight from despair to hope. There is a time for grief and lament, although unchecked despair leads to hardness. The missing link between despair and hope is faith. The kind of faith that transforms is not just the mind's faith, an intellectual assent to truths, but the heart's faith, which is a surrendering. Put another way, a shallow faith is "belief *that*" and a deeper faith is "belief *in*" something, or rather, someone.

What is deep faith?

1) Surrender

We have to realize it's not about us, and that we aren't the ones who can affect change in ourselves or the world around us. As Cecilia shared, when we focus on our own failures we miss what God is doing.

2) Invitation

God will not force Himself into your life, but He is waiting to come in the moment we ask. [See MLK quote] It is foolish to think that we do everything, or that God does. Prayer is the way we invite God—a faith that cries out, even if only to pray "help my unbelief."

3) In Christ

What we need is not a list, but a person, a Savior. When life "gets real," Scripture is real or it's not. Do we have "religion" or the true and living God? Larry attests (and I with him!) that Jesus is *better* than you think.

Think over the circumstances in your life that lack hope. Take some time to surrender those circumstances to God, invite Him into them, and ask what it would mean for Christ to be your Savior in those situations.

The Word made Flesh / Incarnation

Read John 1:1-18 (in the Scripture section or in your Bible).

“The Word became flesh.” Jesus, Son of God, there from the beginning, took on a body. He was born, grew, walked among us, and died. Before he died he instituted the practice of communion, also known as the eucharist:

²³For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:23-25

The ritual of communion points to his incarnation here on earth, which we celebrate at Christmas, and his death and resurrection, which we celebrate at Easter. Each time we take communion we remember not only Christ’s redemptive death on the cross, but the fact that he came here to the earth, as a man, embodied, enfleshed, incarnate. And we remember that he is coming back.

What difference does it make that our God dwelt with us on this earth as a man? Share your thoughts and questions with God, and ask Him to show you more. Here are a few ideas.

1) Scripture tells us that “The Son is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). By coming as a man, Jesus makes God visible in a way not seen before in the history of the world.

2) The Incarnation was necessary for Christ to die on our behalf and provide the way to life: “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).

3) It puts a new perspective on our suffering: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4). When God tells us the way to wholeness is a process that takes time and is sometimes painful, we know that he intimately experiences all the suffering for all the sins of this world—the sins we commit and those committed against us. He did this through the Son, who is fully human and bore it all in his own body. He takes that all upon himself and still says this is the way he has chosen, willingly taking on flesh and suffering that we might be fully restored.

Song (for meditation)

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
Liturgy of St. James; trans. by Gerard Moultrie

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly-minded,
for with blessing in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
in the body and the blood;
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the Light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim, with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!

Benediction (read together in pairs at the end)

Father God, along with the Apostle Paul, we pray that you may strengthen us in our inner being with power through Your Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in Your love. Amen.

- Advent liturgy