

Silent Retreat: Advent

*In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.*

- Psalm 5:3

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

John 1:6-14

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.

Psalm 130

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

² 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 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.

Titus 2:11-14

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹²It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Romans 8:18-25

¹⁸I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Isaiah 52:7-10

⁷How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

⁸Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the Lord returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.

⁹Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰The Lord will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

Other Readings

Most of us think of ourselves as ordinary people living quiet lives in unremarkable places. We are merely hobbits in our shires. But listen! We may not be caught up in a dangerous drama like Frodo and his loyal companion, Sam, but we nonetheless live inside a big story, one that started long before our birth and that will go on long after our death, one that's as wide as the universe and as old as eternity: the Story of God as centered in Jesus the Christ.

Our personal narratives take their fullest shape and deepest meaning in relation to God's purposes for us and for the world. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves." A very large context and very long plot indeed.

In the beginning, the triune God creates the cosmos out of gratuitous love and sheer delight. He makes human beings in his image to know and love him and to know and love one another. He entrusts them with responsibility to care for creation and develop its cultural potential. Foolishly, they assert themselves against God's loving authority with woeful consequences for themselves and the earth. But God in his great mercy enacts his plan to rescue humanity and to right what is wrong. At first, he reveals himself to one nation by which he intends to bless all nations. Eventually he incarnates himself in one person by whom he intends to save all people.

Thus unfolds the drama of Jesus Christ: the prophecies and his miraculous birth, his compassion and teaching, his healings and actions against evil, his unjust suffering and atoning death, his triumphant resurrection and ascent into heaven, after which God gives his very Spirit to indwell Christ's followers and empower them as witnesses and servants in the world. And so the Story continues right to our day, and on it will go until the end of days, when Jesus will return in power to judge all of humanity and history. This long saga of redemption will culminate in the creation of a new heaven and earth in which God's people, resurrected and transformed, will enjoy his presence and share in his glory forever.

This is the Great Story. This is the gospel. It centers on Jesus Christ, but at its heart, amazingly, we also find ourselves. [...]

To embrace Jesus is to be reconciled to God and to consciously step into his Story. And to follow Jesus is to have the shape and purpose of our lives conformed to the shape and purpose of his. So we choose to deny ourselves, to no longer live centered on ourselves as our culture urges but to live in allegiance to him who died for us. We choose to take on his character, live by his teachings and pursue his mission in the world. We seek to do our part in God's reconciliation to himself of all things. We seek to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are prepared to suffer and even die in living this way. Nevertheless, we live in great hope.

In other words, we want to inhabit the still-unfolding Story of God and have it inhabit and change us.

- From *Living the Christian Year* by Bobby Gross

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Christmas is the promise that the God who came in history and comes daily in mystery will one day come in glory. God is saying in Jesus that in the end everything will be all right. Nothing can harm you permanently, no suffering is irrevocable, no loss is lasting, no defeat is more than transitory, no disappointment is conclusive. Jesus did not deny the reality of suffering, discouragement, disappointment, frustration, and death; he simply stated that the Kingdom of God would conquer all of these horrors, that the Father's love is so prodigal that no evil could possibly resist it.

- From *Reflections for Ragamuffins* by Brennan Manning

Knowing the stories of our faith, and how they connect with our own life experiences, means that we can celebrate the faithfulness and grace-bestowing love of God that was given to Abraham and Sarah, to the Israelites in Egypt and in the wilderness, and to the disciples. We can celebrate what is given to us as we join others in claiming God's promise and rejoicing in God's love as we gather at the Lord's table. We can celebrate what will be given to us and to all creation in times yet to come because God is faithful and God keeps God's promises.

We know who we are--children of God *loved* and *forgiven* and *called* by God! And we know Whose we are--children of God who are called to be witnesses to God's love and care for all the world. We are therefore able to share in the festivity that grows out of our shared stories and visions. Our *identity* as God's beloved sons and daughters causes us to seek ways to celebrate and repeatedly affirm that we are who we are!

- From *Rituals for Resurrection* by Linda J. Vogel

Themes for Reflection

The liturgical year begins four Sundays before Christmas Day. Over these three to four weeks, we prepare for Christ's advent, that is, his "coming." This is a time of anticipation, for in it we identify with the ancient Jews in their longing for the Messiah as foretold by the prophets. John the Baptist echoes these prophets as a forerunner to Jesus. Like them, we open our eyes to the darkness around us and lament the suffering in the world. We cry out for God to come and put the world right. Thus we are looking for the second advent of Christ, his return in glory. Also in these days, we identify with expectant Mary waiting for her time of deliverance. While our culture mounts its consuming frenzy, we wait quietly for the coming of the Christ.

- From *Living the Christian Year* by Bobby Gross

The First Coming of Jesus

The early chapters of Luke are filled with stories of hopes and promises fulfilled. Mary (1:46-55) and Zechariah (1:68-79) and Simeon (2:29-32) all recognize that God's salvation is coming and respond with joy.

Take some time to engage with the stories in the first two chapters of Luke. You may want to choose one of these passage for Lectio Divina (see Appendix for more guidance).

Waiting

Read Psalm 130 (above, or in your Bible). What are you waiting for? What have you given up waiting for? In what ways are you "waiting for the Lord"? Does that feel like a hopeful waiting? Reflect, write, talk to God. Tell Him what you long for. Write it in the form of a psalm or prayer. Read that prayer to God again. Sit with it in His presence to see if there is any response for you -- probably not an audible voice (!) but perhaps a word, a verse, a feeling, an image, an invitation to simply be with God.

Anticipating Christmas this year

In Pastor Larry's sermon last week, he suggested that this is a time of year that intensifies feelings, whether good or bad. As you think about Christmas approaching, what sorts of expectations or memories are in your head? Hopes? Fears? It may help to write down a list. Share these things with God. Hold them out to Him, in your heart or with outstretched hands. Ask God what He would like you to hold on to as you go through Advent and approach Christmas.

Lament

Does it surprise you that lament is a part of Advent? The "holiday season" is about family and presents and decorations and celebration, but Advent is about waiting for the Messiah. People living in a perfect world wouldn't be looking for a Savior.

Read Psalm 74. Meditate on verses 4-8:

Your foes roared in the place where you met with us;
they set up their standards as signs.

Israel would have hung signs in the sanctuary as testimonials of God's acts of saving power. Now they're replaced with war standards as a symbol of Israel's defeat.

They behaved like men wielding axes
to cut through a thicket of trees.
They smashed all the carved paneling
with their axes and hatchets.

Think about the reverence with which the Israelites would enter the sanctuary and the care the craftsmen put into the intricately carved paneling. Then think of the malicious glee the invaders take in destroying that beauty (it might help to imagine someone breaking in to our church and defacing it).

They burned your sanctuary to the ground;
they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.
They said in their hearts, "We will crush them completely!"
They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.
We are given no signs from God;
no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.

The temple was central to Israel's identity as a nation and to their relationship with God. Now that place of connection with God has become a place of pain.

Read through the psalm again and use it to meditate on a situation in your own life or the life of your family or community. Take time to grieve over that situation.

Take some time to meditate on the repeated phrase "It was you" in verses 13-17. Remember, it's God's story.

The Great Story

What are some of your favorite stories to tell? What makes them so good to tell? Are they funny, comforting, meaningful, traditional?

Read Genesis chapters 1-2 and Revelation chapters 21-22 (the first and last chapters of the Bible). Refer the first "Other Reading" passage about the Great Story. What does it mean for your life to be part of that story?

When did you first come to see yourself as part of God's story? Is that how you see your life today? Talk with God, on paper if you like, about your role in the Great Story (don't forget to listen as well as speak). Are there people in your life who might be encouraged to hear about your story as part of God's story? Are there ways you'd like to engage God's story as written in the Bible in the new year?

Song (for meditation)

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus
Charles Wesley

Come, Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free.
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
 Israel's strength and consolation,
 Hope of all the earth Thou art.
 Dear desire of every nation,
 Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King.
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
 By thine own eternal Spirit,
 Rule in all our hearts alone.
 By Thine all-sufficient merit,
 Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Benediction (read together in pairs at the end)

Renew in me this day, O Lord, the hope of the new heaven and earth in which you will reign in light and we will live in peace; meanwhile, may your kingdom come and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven; through Jesus Christ our coming King. Amen.

- From *Living the Christian Year* by Bobby Gross