

First Week in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9 - Isaiah gives a condensed, but precise description of sin, reminding us sin is habit-forming and provokes the anger of God (v. 5). Sin defiles us, making it impossible to approach God. It corrupts our character, and even the best we can do is contaminated by base motives. Sin is destructive, shriveling us up from within and creating circumstances that sweep us away (v. 6). Sin alienates us from God, creating an aversion for the Lord that prevents us from calling on His name. Ultimately, sin causes God to hide His face from us and to judge us (v. 7).

Yet, despite all that sin does to us, by faith, Isaiah relies on God's mercy to extend forgiveness (v. 8-9).

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 - Paul bluntly confronts the church at Corinth for its flaws. However, he also affirms their strengths. No congregation is perfect, nor is its situation so bad that there are not some qualities to emphasize. Paul desires to encourage these believers, offering them hope.

He admonishes them to be: "Strong to the end" (1:8). In other words, Paul wants them – and us – to recognize that despite our faults, God is faithful to preserve His own and will keep on working in us to present us blameless when Jesus returns.

Mark 13:24-37 - Many of the first Christians expected Jesus to return in their own lifetime. The people reading Mark's Gospel must have wondered if Jesus would come to save them from their suffering and persecution. Mark helps them understand why they have to wait and watch.

Jesus says it is impossible to predict or calculate when he will return. This is a date which only God the Father knows. For Christians, the best advice is to be ready — like servants waiting for their master to come home.

This Little Light of Mine

This first week of Advent is all about Light and the revelation the Light brings. The prophet Isaiah references the darkness of God's people when God hides His face. In contrast, the psalmist lyrically laments, "show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved."

Imagine the power these words held as saints of old lit the first candle of the Advent season. In the days before electricity and central heat, the light of even a single candle was powerful – enough to push back the darkness of the room and warm the hearts of its inhabitants.

In spite of our modern conveniences of forced heat and halogen lights, our world still lives in darkness. In this spiritual midnight, even the smallest light is powerfully seen and felt. As we light the first candle of Advent, remember that our own lives pierce the darkness, shining the light of Christ, warming hearts with His love. *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...*

Prayer:

God of hope, let Your grace shine on and through me, casting away the works of darkness, putting on the armor of light, bringing Your light of hope to a world darkened in sin. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*

Second Week in Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11 - To those who find themselves undone, there are no words more comforting than the announcement of the coming of the Redeemer as the Lamb of God and as the Good Shepherd. Those who wait for Him, acknowledging their lack of might, find He will be their help if they will humbly depend on Him.

2 Peter 3:8-15a - Our human concept of time means nothing to God, who created and controls time (3:8). The only reason God *delays* judgment is to give as many as possible the opportunity for salvation (3:9). When judgment does come, it will be final and catastrophic, with the very elements of nature melting in “fire” (3:10). In light of this certain judgment, we should live in holiness as we await the better world that will follow (3:11-13).

Mark 1:1-8 - The Old Testament predicted Jesus would be preceded by a herald (a messenger) sent to prepare men for his appearance. John the Baptist came as the last representative of the old order with the express purpose of introducing the key personality of the new.

The deity of Jesus Christ is fully attested by the seal of the Father from heaven, His victory over Satan, His authority to call men, and His power over evil spirits and all manner of diseases.

Tiny Peaces

Peace. In a world that is too often divided and divisive, the mere mention of peace can bring a person to tears. And soothe a heart. And quiet chaos.

Today’s readings speak of this peace. Isaiah comforts God’s people with a proclamation of reconciliation and peace with God. The psalmist speaks of righteousness and peace “kissing.” Peter acknowledges the difficulty of waiting for God’s ultimate justice, yet encourages waiting in peace. And Mark writes of John the Baptist’s message of peace with God through Jesus Christ.

Who are the people in your life who need peace? What relationships need reconciliation? Only God can mend a broken world with His peace. We, however, can be instruments of that healing on an individual level, bringing wholeness and tiny “peaces” to broken lives and broken relationships.

Prayer:

God of peace, You sent Your Word to speak repentance and reconciliation to me. Help me to extend that same peace to others so together; we may know the joy of your eternal kingdom. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

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Third Week in Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 - After the day of Christ's vengeance, comfort will be given to restored Israel. The setting up of the Kingdom in the earth will mean the repairing of all the waste places and all the ends of the earth shall see God's great salvation.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 - As he concluded his letter, Paul gave several exhortations (5:12-22), assuring the Thessalonians that God was ready to bless them and keep them "blameless" until Christ's return (5:23-24). He admonishes them (and us) to be joyful (vs. 16), prayerful (vs. 17), thankful (vs. 18), and careful (vs. 19-22).

John 1:6-8, 19-28 - The Jews expect a great prophet to come before the Messiah or 'Christ' appears. John the Baptist doesn't claim to be this prophet — although Jesus will later say he was. John prefers to think of himself in the words of Isaiah. He is a voice, an announcer. He clears the road for God's arrival. The baptism he offers is simply a wash to help people get ready. The Christ who is coming will be very much greater than this humble herald!

Lit Up With Joy

A woman told the story of being given two candlesticks for Christmas. Each was made of brass and spelled out the word "joy." At first she took them for granted, displaying them only because she was young and had few Christmas decorations. But over the years, those candlesticks became more precious.

In the year following her husband's death, she hesitated to display them at all, feeling none of the joy they spelled out. In subsequent years she would bring them out, noticing that the brass finish was dull and tarnished. But year after year, season after season, she unpacked and displayed them, knowing the season was about more than what she felt in the moment. Until finally, she realized joy had been there all along – not because of her circumstances, but in spite of them. The tarnish only serves as a patina to bring attention to the flames of the candles' bright light.

Today's readings remind us that we are like those candlesticks. Like Isaiah, we are commissioned to carry "good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted..." And when we find ourselves broken and despairing, the psalmist reminds us "those who sow in tears will reap with joy." In places and moments when our joy feels tarnished, the Light is shining most brightly.

Pray:

God of joy, stir up Your power in me, allowing your grace and mercy to help me overcome sin, shining the joy of Your salvation in and through my life. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

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Fourth Week in Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 - Nathan receives a message from the Lord. God doesn't want or need a house. There is even some danger in building a temple, because it will seem to 'fix' God in one place. The Israelites have always experienced God 'on the move', leading them forward on a journey of faith. He does not live in a temple or shrine, but with his people, wherever they are.

Far from David needing to establish God's house, God is going to establish David's 'house' or dynasty. He promises to be a father to David. He will make David very great, and his descendants will reign forever.

Romans 16:25-27 - How is it possible to take sinful human beings, motivated by selfish and sinful passions, separated by racial prejudice and vast social differences, and create a community bonded together by selfless love? Only God could do it in the world of the first century. And only God can do it today. The message of Romans is that through a righteousness imputed to us by faith and made real by continuing trust in our living Lord He will do it.

Luke 1:26-38 - Six months later, Gabriel appeared to a virgin named Mary, engaged to a man named Joseph. She would have a child while still a virgin. The child would be named Jesus and would be Israel's long-awaited Messiah (1:26-33). The angel explained the miraculous nature of this conception, and to substantiate his amazing prediction, he told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, though old and barren, had also miraculously conceived (1:34-37). Mary expressed her willingness to bear the child.

House of Love

What makes a house a home? Love. Today's readings make this point very clear.

God tells Nathan he doesn't need a "home" – He needs the love of being welcomed to move freely among God's people. And in a very real sense, He sends this same message to Mary, a young virgin. In her very body, He will create a "home" for Himself – a loving, nurturing setting where He can develop and grow, revealing Himself to a waiting world.

Too often, we hold ourselves back from God – from people – because we are "not good enough." *I can't invite so-and-so over, the house isn't clean enough. There's no point in offering to serve; I don't have the right experience.* God isn't looking for perfection – He's looking for us. In loving hearts, God reveals Himself, transforming humble people into mansions fitted for His glory. Make ready your heart and home to be a dwelling place for God's great Love.

Pray:

God of love, through Your daily dwelling in my heart, prepare for Yourself a mansion fit for Your glory. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen..

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