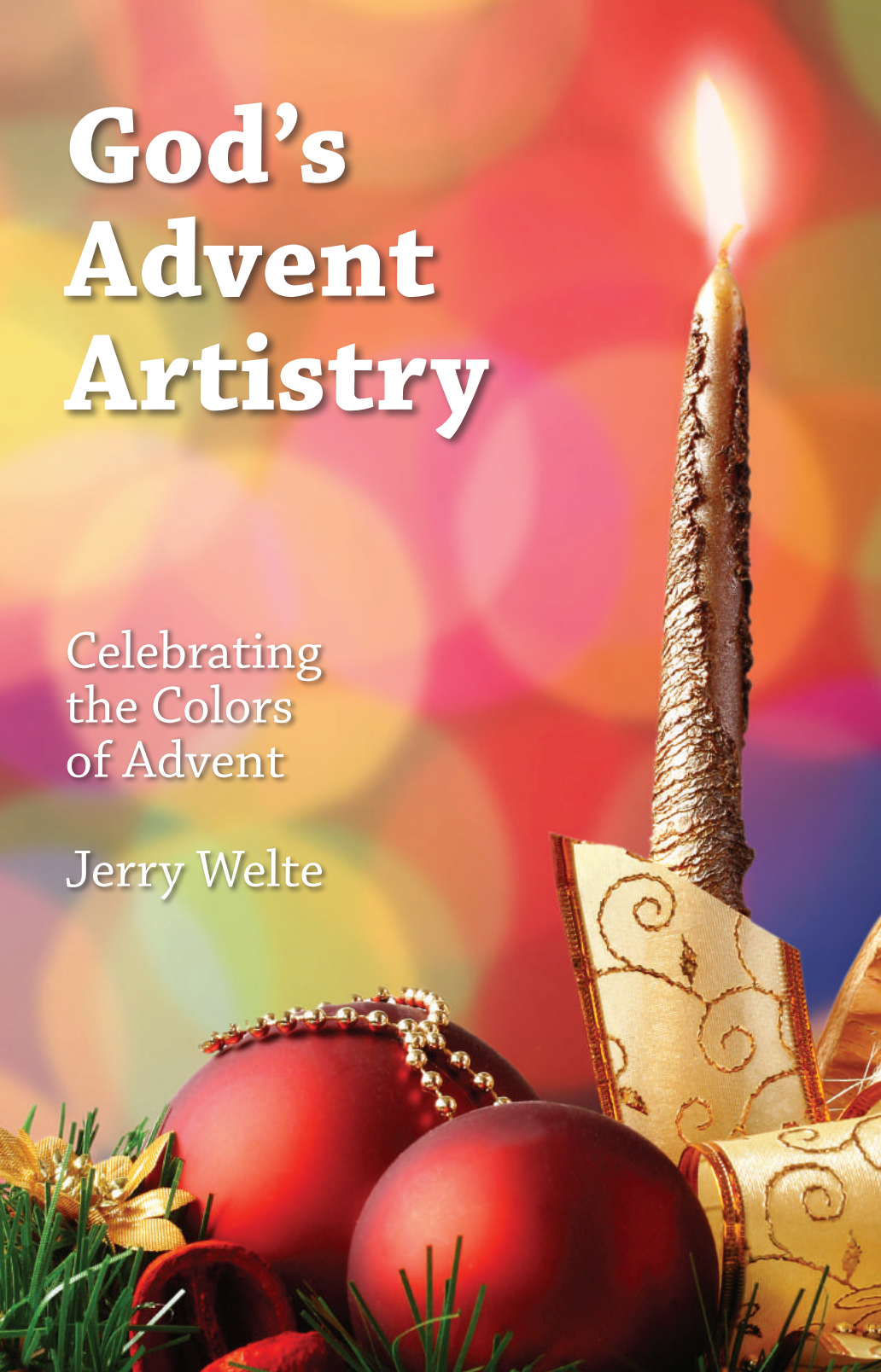


God's Advent Artistry

Celebrating
the Colors
of Advent

Jerry Welte



Introduction

Advent as God's Coloring Book

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

—Isaiah 9:1

Any doubt that God is a master of the art of coloring is quickly removed by studying the symbols of the Jesse Tree. The burning bush, the rainbow in the clouds, Joseph's coat of many colors and the star of David are all fruits of the Lord's Advent artistry. Coloring has lately been reborn as a creative, therapeutic pastime for adults. Bookstores now feature entire displays of coloring books for grownups. Advent embraces this as much more than a hobby, for God echoes oldie pop song lyrics in calling believers to "color my world with hope" and to "paint it with your love."

To relearn the lost art of coloring, the Lord refers adults to very capable mentors: "Unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Watching little children color is a study in divine artistry. Just as children color outside the lines, so does Jesus love "out of bounds" by eating with sinners and healing on the Sabbath. Childlike art is often abstract rather than literal, drawn in the pattern of Christ who outlined the blueprint for God's reign with parables and riddles.

While adults are returning to coloring, modern children are sadly gravitating to electronics. Advent calls all God's children to recollect the days when a deluxe box of crayons was a magical Christmas gift. We prepare for the birth of Christ by opening this treasure chest and employing all the bold and subtle shades of divine creativity. Advent colors reflect the diverse emotions, moods and impulses of human experience and amazing grace. We color with crayons of patience, longing, joy, hope, wonder and compassion, Advent is a divine plan that is brought to us in living color. Let us celebrate it as an artistic masterpiece of faith.

First Sunday of Advent

Wonder as You Wander

*You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming
at an unexpected hour. —Matthew 24:44*



There are few childhood rituals I recall more clearly than delightfully puzzling over the mystery of what I was getting for Christmas. When the first package appeared under the tree, I would explore it like a stalwart private investigator. I would gently shake it, look for telltale gaps in the wrapping and attempt to see through the paper for text or pictures. Advent is like the first package under the tree of our spiritual family, the Church. We know that Christ is coming and bringing gifts, but the child in us longs to know what they are and when we can open them. The anticipation to unwrap God's presents is perhaps the first gift of the season and we should embrace it without hesitation or doubt. We live in a world of mystery and we are called to ponder life's complex mix of delight and sorrow. As the poignant carol suggests, Advent is a season to wonder as we wander. If an unexamined life is not worth living, then certainly an unexplored gift from on high is not worth receiving.

Prayer: God of mystery, fill us with holy wonder so that our Advent journey may give us both pause and delight.

Monday of the First Week of Advent

A Passion for Seeing Red

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. —Psalm 122:6



The suggestion that emotions are morally neutral can be unsettling. Faith implicitly socializes us to divide emotions into positive and negative categories and process our feelings accordingly. Something in us resists the notion that every feeling is equally good or valuable. Serenity may feel more pleasant than anger, but it is not superior. Like any emotion, anger tells us something vital about ourselves. It reveals what bothers us and clarifies our priorities. Seeing red reminds us that values inspire passion and that anger often mysteriously springs from love. History chronicles the tragic reality that the Holy Land, the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, is rife with anger. Advent is a time to bemoan war and violence, but not a time to repress our passion for justice. The solution to conflict is not to quell legitimate anger, but rather to let outrage move us to seek just solutions to our problems. As we manage smaller disputes in our homes and communities, we prayerfully employ anger and empathy as springboards to peace. Red, the color of both love and anger, is a familiar sight in the holiday season. Let us see red as we embrace our passions and pursue them with love.

Prayer: Grant us peace in the holy lands of our hearts by blending a passion for justice with the compassion of love.

Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

Recapturing Holy Innocence

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them. —Isaiah 11:6



Children are naïve about the perils of the world and we rightly instruct them to be careful. Yet, children are also blessedly ignorant of the unfriendly beasts in our hearts and we do well to let them teach us how to manage them, especially during the holidays. For good and for ill, adulthood brings complexity to relationships, complications arising from bittersweet history, fragile egos and dysfunctional communication. For children the equation is much simpler: “I really like you, so play with me!” Recently a rift developed between me and my stepson that caused communication to break down. When he brought our granddaughter over for a visit, she giggled as I gave her piggy back rides past her quiet father. Advent is a season to rediscover the innocence of youth, the secrets of the kingdom that are hidden from the clever and revealed to children. We teach our young not to play with matches or snakes, so it is only right that we allow them to teach us that lions can indeed lie down with lambs and the elephants in our rooms can be tamed.

Prayer: Innocent Lamb of God, teach us to reclaim the keys of the kingdom locked in the innocent childlike heart.

Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

Still Still Still

The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. —Psalm 23:2



We may not see any verdant pastures during Advent, but green wreaths and trees abound. Such greenery will more than suffice to inspire us to seek the gifts of peace and quiet offered to us by this season. Society does not cooperate in this holy quest, for it is all too easy for the holidays to become a marathon of decorating, baking, shopping and parties that leaves us collapsed on the sofa by the end. After running this gauntlet, it is not uncommon to feel more relieved than gratified. Undoubtedly, there are rewards to be gleaned from the frenzy in the warm company of friends, the reminiscence of family stories and the beaming faces of children. Yet, perhaps no December experiences are more memorable than quiet moments spent by the fire, gazing at falling snow or celebrating the beautiful Advent liturgies in community. Let us allow the Good Shepherd to lead us to these quiet resting places during Advent for the restorative calm they offer: All is hushed, the world is sleeping, holy star its vigil keeping. Still, still, still, one can hear the falling snow.

Prayer: Good shepherd, give us repose by the still waters of your presence and the warm fire of your Spirit.

Thursday of the First Week of Advent

Homeland Security

*A strong city have we; God sets up walls and ramparts to protect us.
—Isaiah 26:1*



The days of my youth were times of security. Occasionally we hunkered under our desks in somewhat ludicrous nuclear air raid drills, but children generally grew up with a firmly rooted sense of being safe and sound. Security is a tougher sell in the modern era of amber alerts and airport screenings, but Advent is adamant in its hopeful faith. Modern homes may come equipped with panic rooms, but those who make their dwelling place with the Lord live in the shelter of God's love. The security Advent offers is not built on walls of concrete and steel, but in the stout belief that God is alive and active in our midst. The Lord's walls are constructed of compassion and divine ramparts are forged of prophetic action. Faith bids us to fend off the greatest enemy of all, the temptation to surrender to a life of fear. Still, Advent is hardly naïve, for it extols us to "stay awake." Moreover, the city of God is defended with the sturdy walls of devoted parents, wise senior citizens, caring teachers, cooperative neighbors, good shepherds and brave civil servants. There will be dangers, just as there were in the ancient world, but we retain peace in the knowledge that our city is built on the love that conquers all.

Prayer: God our Rock, steady our hearts and shelter our spirits in the certain faith that you are near.

Friday of the First Week of Advent

How Do You Plead?

*No longer shall Jacob be ashamed; no longer shall his face grow pale.
—Isaiah 29:22*



The violet of Advent is distinct from the purple of Lent, for Advent is more about doing justice than doing penance. Guilt has a legitimate place in Christian spirituality, but too often the wrong people entertain this duplicitous guest. Innocents may chastise themselves even for good fortune or undeserved pains, like the plane crash passenger beset with survivor guilt or the battered wife contrite for burning dinner. Meanwhile, real sinners wreak havoc without a shred of remorse. Hypocrites foster guilt as a vehicle of subjugation and control, deftly packing heavy baggage for upright people to carry around. The danger of belittling ourselves is that undue shame shrinks our hearts for service. The energy wasted punishing ourselves is better utilized to reward the afflicted with comfort. If we feel unworthy of God's gifts, how can we pass them on? After the flood, God set a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of heaven and earth's conciliation and sent Christ from above to permanently seal the rift. Jesus forgave sinners in order to commission them as agents of divine mercy. The self-righteous plead "not guilty," but the faithful plead "ready and willing" to prepare the way of the Lord.

Prayer: Forgiving Lord, set a rainbow in our hearts to welcome your diverse people into the one body of Christ.

Saturday of the First Week of Advent

The Color of Money

You received without payment; give without payment.
—Matthew 10:8



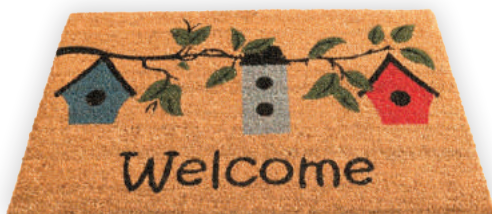
Advent sets two contrasting shades of green against each other in a battle for spiritual supremacy. In one corner is the green of life and hope symbolized by our wreaths and trees; in the other is the green of excessive consumerism signified by “the almighty dollar.” These two shades of green need not be mortal enemies, for wise, caring shoppers know who to employ money as an endearing instrument of love. It is the human penchant for greed and materialism that threatens to turn these would-be partners into mortal enemies. As we witness the erosion of Thanksgiving observance by Black Friday shopping hours and the sometimes injurious stampedes of holiday doorbuster sales, we realize that spiritual “prophet sheets” are not always compatible with the profits that seek to gain the whole world at the risk of losing the soul. Advent calls us to delight in the festivity of Christmas giving, but also to reclaim a level of sane simplicity that makes this ritual more human and holy. God gives without cost, so we must learn to freely give the gifts that truly matter. Let the greenery of the season inspire us to donate our time, to give our talents and to share our treasure with the poor and needy.

Prayer: Humble Lord, let us march to the different drum of the poor boy who had no gift but to play for you from his heart.

Second Sunday of Advent

Hospitality Rules

*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you,
for the glory of God. —Romans 15:7*



The Advent scriptures are bursting with stories of hospitality. The annunciation, the visitation and the incarnation are all tales about making room for the Lord and for God's people. The songs of the season also evoke this eminently human and divine quality. We dream of being home for Christmas and imagine chestnuts roasting on an open fire. The holidays do not make this task easy, however, for no season is more adept at stirring up old wounds and surfacing petty resentments that bounce around inside us during family dinners and seasonal parties. The ministry of hospitality requires preparation. If we are to make up a room for any guest, divine or human, we must sweep out the cobwebs of hurtful memories and clear away the dust of envy, regret or sibling rivalry. If hospitality is to rule in our hearts and homes, then we must follow the rules of humility, graciousness, fairness and mutual respect. In the end, we become wise and gracious innkeepers as we allow ourselves to see beyond appearances, grudges and comparisons: "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have entertained angels."

*Prayer: Emmanuel, may we welcome you into our hearts
and shelter your people with our love.*

Monday of the Second Week of Advent

It's Not Easy Staying Green

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom. —Isaiah 35:1*



Lawns are a rare sight in desert states like Arizona and New Mexico. Where green grass is still found, substantial resources are required to maintain it. It is no different in the realm of faith. When our lives become barren and dry as we encounter seasons of spiritual drought, it is not easy to keep our spirits fresh and green. It takes considerable supernatural resources to preserve the fields of the Lord where God's children may engage in life-giving work and play. The Advent wreath is a hopeful reminder of enduring divine life as we traverse arid deserts of loneliness, doubt or loss. Evergreen symbolizes God's constant, dynamic presence as we begin each new "year of our Lord." Life with God is not supported by human sprinkler systems, but sudden cloudbursts and underground streams that refresh the parched soil of our spirits. Through the holy resources of prayer, solitude, community, service and recreation, we too may find that our spirits can be restored and our lives can be made ever-green.

*Prayer: Living God, draw us into the circle of life with you,
the evergreen wreath of communion with living water.*

Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent

The Place of Muted Celebration

*Cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good tidings.
—Isaiah 40:9*



It sounds strange to say it, but sometimes faith calls for muted celebration. There is a time and place for shouting the good news at the top of our lungs, but also for curbing our enthusiasm and bridling our festivity. In the film, *Broadcast News*, an anchor with a charmed life muses aloud, “What do you do when your real life exceeds your dreams?” The hapless reporter instantly quips a sarcasm tinged with gospel truth: “Keep it to yourself!” Christmas is a season of miracles, but not everyone gets one. Celebratory gratitude must be tempered by empathy. The cancer survivor does not dance in the terminal ward and the lottery winner does not parade past a soup kitchen. Part of the good news is the wisdom that knows when to offer shouts of “alleluia” and when to give the solidarity of empathetic silence. In the arena of sports, victorious athletes party in full view of the losing team, but on the playing field of life, we best give thanks by sharing our blessings with the poor, the outcast and the downtrodden. Christ showed the way by muting his divine glory in order to compassionately share the human condition.

*Prayer: Lord of life, you were born in poverty to reveal
the surpassing riches of God’s love.*

Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

Holy Longing

You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. —James 5:8



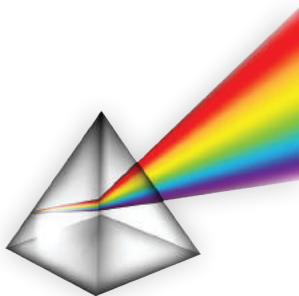
“I can’t wait” is the clarion call of every child during December. Advent is the season to practice waiting, but perhaps we never become fully enamored of this bittersweet spiritual skill. Despite our longing, the Lord will not be hurried. To make longing holy, we must tell time differently. *Chronos* is the Greek word for chronological time, the minutes by which we typically measure our days. We experience *chronos* when we “can’t wait” for Friday or summer or Christmas. Staring anxiously at the clock or calendar has the opposite of the intended effect as time slows down like a watched kettle that never boils. *Kairos* is the term for God’s time, a gift that is actually timeless. Entering *Kairos* makes chronological time fade and provides a foretaste of eternity. We experience *Kairos* when we become absorbed in a compelling movie, gaze into a lover’s eyes or meditate in God’s presence. That is why we emerge from *Kairos* wondering, “Where did the time go?” Let us practice this holy paradox of Christ during Advent by losing time with the Lord and with each other. As we do so, we will miraculously gain time and find ourselves in the moment of Christmas with our eternal God.

Prayer: Timeless God, grant us the holy longing that saves time by losing it and makes up time by giving it away.

Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

White Christmas in the Soul

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. —Luke 1:28



Holiday revelers dream of a white Christmas, but followers of Christ long to emulate the pure white spirit of Mary, the Immaculate Conception. We typically regard purification as a process of diminishment. Just as we purify water by straining out contaminants, we make a soul immaculate by filtering out imperfections. The spiritual life understands this, but it also embraces purification as a process of enrichment. Appearances suggest that white is the most basic and plain of colors, like pedestrian tones that are deemed “vanilla.” Closer inspection reveals that white is arguably the most complex hue, for it contains all the other colors. In reality, then, the purification of Mary was a journey of embellishment or enhancement. Shining a flashlight through a prism reveals all the colors of the spectrum and shining God’s light through Mary projects all the shades of the spiritual life. Rather than straining out sinful impulses, the Mother of Jesus integrated them into the spiritual whole that we call holiness. This is why we adorn our newly baptized in white and why the white Christ candle is the culmination of our Advent wreath observance.

Prayer: Holy God, purify our hearts by addition as well as subtraction, by enrichment as much as diminishment.

Friday of the Second Week of Advent

Our Advent Mood Ring

*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed,
and you did not mourn. —Matthew 11:17*



Human moods are fickle and easily affected by trivial things. A change in the weather, a five-minute wait, a fleeting memory or a misread comment can all spoil a mood. Romance is particularly subject to emotional capriciousness because the moods of two people must be in sync for affection to blossom. A dream date may fail because one longs to go out dancing while the other prefers a quiet dinner. Perhaps the difficulty of reading emotional states is what prompted the invention of a mood ring. How convenient it would be if beloved spouses, relatives and friends changed color to signal their coolness, warmth, anger, sadness or joy. In an instant we would know whether to draw close or allow personal space. Our Lord was subject to human moods, but came to embody a God whose love is constant and unchanging. The Advent wreath is a fitting symbol of divine love, for it is a mood ring that never changes its hopeful, life-giving color. For the Christian community, the presence of Jesus is a catalyst for the moods of love, mercy, compassion, kindness and forgiveness. The nearness of God inspires the surpassing, undying mood of love that we call Christian community.

*Prayer: Constant God, may your coming put us in the holy mood
to reach out to others in grace and mercy.*

Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

The Price of Passion

Like fire a prophet appeared; his words a flaming furnace.
—Sirach 48:1



Red is the color of passion and faith calls us to embrace it as a holy manifestation of God's Spirit. Elijah's fiery chariot is a fitting symbol of the prophetic zeal for truth and justice. The crimson tides of the holiday season bid us all to identify our passions and to pursue them without pause or restraint. Faith, however, extols us to set our sights on higher loves than luxury cars adorned with big red bows. As we do so, we learn the daunting truth that Christ never concealed from his disciples that passion for God's dreams comes with a steeper price tag than high-end autos. The Magi included myrrh with their gifts, an embalming fluid with a symbolic prophetic message. The same divine passion that inspires messianic birth eventually leads to the passion of death on the cross. As our own pursuits become aligned with the heart of the divine, we too must prepare ourselves to suffer for our dreams, to be persecuted for telling the truth and to endure deaths of various sorts for making justice. Such passion will take us much further than any luxury vehicle, transporting us to a Promised Land beyond all telling.

Prayer: Redeemer Lord, fill us with the fire of the Spirit that pursues your passions and suffers for your love.

Third Sunday of Advent

In the Pink

The ransomed of the Lord shall return; they shall obtain joy and gladness; sorrow and mourning shall flee. —Isaiah 35:10



There is a strident, unconvincing quality to much of our pop cultural joy. Morning talk shows feature jovial hosts who sandwich sobering human tragedy between lighthearted banter. Late night comics poke fun at human follies for which we appear to have no other solution, making jokes that hint of surrender more than resilience. Shakespeare might have put it this way: “Methinks thou make jest too much.” Laughter is good medicine and the arts can provide spiritual enrichment, but entertainment might not be a trillion-dollar industry if we had more authentic joy at the center of our beings. Pop culture pours frivolity over despair in an attempt to drown our sorrows, but faith does the opposite. Faith pours sorrow and fear into the core of its joy so that they may be absorbed or dissipated. Advent knows better than to presume we can be healed just by being “tickled pink,” but it boldly lights the pink candle in the solid conviction that true joy staunchly resists being extinguished by life’s sorrow.

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, lighten our hearts and brighten our spirits
as you come to bring joy to the world.*

Monday of the Third Week of Advent

Pseudo Religious Killjoys

*By what authority are you doing these things,
and who gave you this power? —Matthew 21:23*



Perhaps there is no more penetrating critique of religion than the charge that it too often sucks the joy out of life. No one likes to be called a “wet blanket,” but religion has produced its fair share of them. The Scribes and Pharisees constantly attempted to smother the infectious enthusiasm of Christ’s work with blankets of complaint, disparagement and traps. The Lord condemned such killjoys for laying heavy burdens on others without lifting a finger to lift them. Faith comes with a charge to do serious work, but its dutiful dimension is mitigated by the ebullient heart of Jesus. Those who strive to reduce discipleship to servitude, love to responsibility and sacramental celebration to obligation practice a pseudo religion that is out of touch with the gospel. More importantly, they miss a central point of Christ’s mission: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” The heart of Christ is sacred primarily because it beats in rhythm with the boundless joy of our God.

*Prayer: Sacred Heart, fill us with the joyful Spirit that lightens hearts
rather than burdening souls.*

Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

The Gray Area

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. —Matthew 21:31



We employ the color gray as a metaphor for dreary, lifeless days, so it would seem to be the antithesis of an Advent hue. Yet, gray has an essential place in the divine painter's color palette. Pope Francis writes in his encyclical *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*: "By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and growth." Christians reject a strictly black and white approach to morality because they follow a Messiah who confounded the Pharisees by insisting that laws are made for people rather than people being made for laws. Jesus refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery, but freely denounced self-righteous hypocrisy. Following that lead, Pope Francis goes on to write: "A pastor cannot feel that it is enough to simply apply moral laws to those living in 'irregular' situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives." Jesus taught that bending the law to heal on the Sabbath is the will of God. Disciples of Christ fully understand that there are moral absolutes, but they also realize that God's love and mercy are sometimes discovered in the gray areas of life.

Prayer: Lord of love, give us the eyes that recognize compassion as the higher law of your Spirit.

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

Advent Interior Decorating

Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.

—Psalm 85:11



Paint departments in home improvement stores display a wide array of sample color strips to help interior decorators select the perfect shades for their walls. Examining paint samples is intriguing, for distinctive individual colors can suddenly appear only subtly different when viewed on a spectrum. In turn, two shades that seem virtually identical display striking uniqueness when examined side by side. The spiritual life is like this. Emotions that seem disconnected can be related and feelings presumed to be identical can be distinct. On the color strip of faith, unsightly envy is not far removed from benign emulation and high standards can easily be misread as snobbishness. Soul painters are faced with a wide range of shades that are closely related yet distinct in their impact when displayed on spiritual walls: assertiveness and aggression, empathy and pity, caution and apathy, confidence and bossiness, joy and frivolity, hope and fantasy. Advent is the season to “let every heart prepare him room.” True interior decorators employ the time tested color guide of prayerful discernment to paint their rooms with the shades that best reflect the love and glory of God

Prayer: Compassionate Lord, guide us as we undertake the interior decorating that prepares our rooms for your coming.

Thursday of the Third Week of Advent

The Gift of Disillusionment

*For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you. —Isaiah 54:10*



Faith is the antithesis of disillusionment. Disciples of Christ pride themselves on maintaining steady hearts and vibrant spirits. Upon further review, however, “disillusionment” turns out to be an odd word. We eschew the thought of becoming dis-illusioned, but what could be healthier than having illusions and false hopes purged from our minds. Faith provides the lenses through which we recognize the illusions upon which the world too often sets its mesmerized sights. Advertising promotes mirages of eternal youth, narcissistic fame and blatant opulence, yet the gospel condemns these pursuits as false prophets to be firmly rejected. Modern existential skepticism also spurns faith as “pie in the sky” naïveté, insisting that God is dead and inviting us to live for the moment. Advent is the spiritual antidote to popular illusion, fostering faith in the past, love in the present and hope in the future. To anticipate God’s coming is to give ourselves to a process by which we are purified of illusions and gifted with trust in the most real things of all.

*Prayer: Faithful God, instill in us the faith that cradles the past,
engages the present and embraces the future.*

Friday of the Third Week of Advent

Own Your Feelings and Actions

*Happy is the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath,
and refrains from doing any evil. —Isaiah 56:2*



Finger pointing holds a central, though undistinguished place in the annals of human morality. It started with Adam blaming Eve for eating the apple and continues as children fault siblings for misbehavior: “My brother made me do it.” We are also fond of projecting our feelings, a ploy that might have promoted Jesus to blame his anger on the Pharisees: “You make me mad!” Our Lord had no problem with his anger, however. Jesus knew what he was doing when he upended tables while driving the money changers from the temple. While certain actions trigger our emotional responses, our feelings are not given to us by other people. The same is true of our actions. The behavior of others exerts pressure on our choices, but we are ultimately responsible for what we do. The word “emotion” is rooted in the French for “to stir up” and the Latin for “to move.” Advent prayers bid the Lord to “rouse your power and come to save us.” In turn, we hope that the innate devout feelings stirred up by Christ’s birth will move us to make peace and do justice.

*Prayer: Gracious God, help us to embrace the gift of our emotions
and rouse their power for doing good.*

Saturday of the Third Week of Advent

A Bitter Pill

You too a sword will pierce, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. —Luke 2:35



A Facebook post offered concise wisdom for coping with life's struggles: "You either get bitter or you get better; it's that simple!" Appealing as this advice sounded, I wondered if crisis management is that easy. Caregivers waging unwinnable battles against chronic disease agree that resentment and self-pity are soul enemies to be bravely fought. Still, experience suggests that there is middle ground between victory and surrender; between "bitter" and "better." Wounded warriors returning from any battle may not be bitter, but they are often understandably weary, haunted or shell shocked. The name Mary means "bitter," a telling reference to the sorrowful mysteries that accompanied the joy of God-motherhood. Mary had a bitter pill to swallow, but she had no modern meds to relieve her disease. The prescription of faith made Mary stronger, but also stirred her deep, still waters with the haunted currents of a wounded warrior for Christ. She did not employ her sorrows to feed self-pity, but to nurture the compassion that healed others.

Prayer: Lord of love, may our suffering teach us compassion and our losses gain us healing wisdom for self and others.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Dimmer Then Glimmer

The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” —Matthew 1:23



In Stephen Sondheim’s play, *Into the Woods*, one character sings a lyric that poetically captures the spirit of Advent: “The light is getting dimmer; I think I see a glimmer.” Christ is born at the winter solstice, the pivotal transition to the longer days that signal the triumph of light over darkness. The Light of the World turns the tide of “dimmer” to the effusive glimmer of daybreak. The bleak hours of night give rise to the wisdom that “it is always darkest just before the dawn.” Faith, in turn, celebrates the paradox that God’s definitive Word made Flesh is best spoken in the stillness of a silent night. The birth of Christ is the spiritual forerunner to *Daylight Savings Time*, calling believers to the holy work of preserving this precious supernatural resource. Still, Christians do not wander blithely through the woods at night, for we are not blind to the evils that lurk in life’s shadows. Instead, like shepherds on the hillside, we watch over one another even as we keep faithful vigil for the glorious dawn of God’s new day.

Prayer: Light of the World, dispel the tides of lingering darkness in us by the effusive light of your saving presence.

Monday of the Fourth Week of Advent

Act Not Afraid

*Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.
Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. —Luke 1:13*



Perhaps no gospel exhortation is offered more earnestly or frequently than, “Do not be afraid.” Mary, Joseph, Zechariah and the shepherds are all issued this therapeutic divine counsel during Advent. With all due respect to the surpassing wisdom of Scripture, however, it is virtually impossible for humans to avoid fear. Fear is a spontaneous emotional response to danger and as such is quite useful, even essential. Various forms and degrees of fear lurk in the hearts of soldiers marching into battle, patients facing surgery, defendants awaiting a verdict and employees starting a new job. We are mistaken if we believe that Mary did not feel anxious as she rode pregnant to Bethlehem or that Jesus was fearless on the cross. The true measure of bravery does not lie in emotion, but in action. In the end, it is what we do in response to our fear that defines our character. Though a literal rendering of the angels’ iconic message is not as lyrical, it would be more precise for God’s messengers to say, “Act not afraid!” Faith is the true “home of the brave” for those who dare to carry out God’s will even as they wrestle with the inner demon of fear.

*Prayer: Merciful God, strengthen our hearts and hands to let go of fear
and embrace the hope of your coming.*

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Advent

Out of the Blue

*Ask a sign of the Lord, your God; let it be deep as the nether world
or high as the sky! —Isaiah 7:11*



Advent embodies faith's serendipitous belief that God's blessings sometimes come seemingly out of nowhere. We encounter this magical reality at a surprise party, upon finding a "love at first sight," or after being "called on the carpet" at work, only to receive an unexpected raise or promotion. A typical life sees its share of unpleasant surprises, but Advent dares to imagine expressions of love that come "out of the blue." The bumps and bruises of harsh reality may leave us with our eyes downcast. To catch God's wonders, we must keep our heads held high and our eyes raised to the heavens with the psalmist: "I lift my eyes to the mountains from whence shall come my help." Advent invites us to remain open to the unexpected times and places of Christ's birth in our lives. Yet, faith also bids us to become agents of amazing grace, surprising despondent individuals with a phone call, a smile, a kind word, a greeting card, a visit or a simple gift. As we do so, doubters may experience a conversion to faith in miracles that come out of the blue rather than once in a blue moon.

*Prayer: Incarnate Lord, make us heralds of surprising hope and joy to a
world hungry for good news.*

Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Advent

A Holy Blush

*How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord
should come to me? —Luke 1:43*



Elizabeth almost seems embarrassed at the sight of the Blessed Mother at her door and we can easily imagine her blushing. A blush is an involuntary physical response to an unexpected stimulus that sends more blood to the face. More to the spiritual point, blushing is an odd spiritual mix of bewilderment and wonder. Elizabeth is both confused and amazed by the gift of abiding presence being offered by the holy woman standing before her. She feels at once humbly unworthy and blessedly affirmed. Disciples of Christ do well to follow her lead and grow wide-eyed and red-faced in response to God's Christmas visitation. We blush because we feel undeserving of divine company, but also because a deep seated sense of our inherent goodness—instilled by the divine Creator—has suddenly been validated. Perhaps there is no better response to holy visitations than to go forth like Mary to greet relatives, friends and strangers with the Good news of their human worth. We are called to make each other blush with the bewilderment and wonder of God's surpassing gift of real presence.

*Prayer: Divine Visitor, make us blush with the wonder of your coming
and the good news that we are loved.*

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Advent

Glory in Stained Glass

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
—Luke 1:46



The Blessed Mother magnified the Lord through the window of a spotless spirit, but the rest of us must find a way to do so through stained glass. The human condition of Original Sin renders us marred with the stains of imperfection: the green of envy, the red of animosity, the yellow of cowardice, the purple of shame and the blue of sadness. In the midst of this chaos, God is born in mystery and paradox to once again declare, “Let there be light!” The Lord takes pleasure in assembling broken, flawed, scattered pieces of humanity into a glorious portal through which the light of God can shine upon the world. The Holy Spirit is the lead that binds these pieces together in love. Faith—both our faith in God and God’s faith in us—is the iron frame that preserves its integrity when storms threaten to shatter or muddy it. The end result of God’s grand architectural design is the cathedral of living stones and guiding light that we call the Church. Advent is the season to embrace the call to be the light of the world, glory coming through stained glass and illuminating the darkness.

Prayer: Spirit of God, bind us together in love and let your light shine through our eyes upon the people who walk in darkness.

Friday of the Fourth Week of Advent

When Christmas Is Blue

*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation;
Rachel weeping for her children. —Matthew 2:18*



Christmas is tailor made for the bliss of reunion, but the human condition does not always cooperate with the plan. Early one December morning I found my mother crying in the kitchen for her father who had died during the night. So it is that Advent can leave good people singing the blues. Funerals are still scheduled, lovers break up and not every veteran makes it home for the holidays. A familiar Christmas song needs just a few words to capture this reality: “I’ll have a blue Christmas without you.” Just as the holidays amplify the happiness of meeting, so do they magnify the sorrow of separation. Most of us have taken a turn at being alone on Christmas, but even those surrounded by company are not immune to holiday blues. There is no easy solution, but we do well at these times to step out of ourselves by volunteering at soup kitchens, getting involved in parish life or simply walking amidst the holiday crowds. Love is the spiritual air that renews our souls but, like our veins, our lifeblood runs blue while it is deoxygenated. The coming of Emmanuel, “God with us” enriches our blood with the fresh air of Christ’s birth.

Prayer: Emmanuel, be with us in this holy season so that we may be in good company and be good company for others.

Saturday of the Fourth Week of Advent

Color Guard for Christ

You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. —Luke 1:76



It is considered an honor to be part of a color guard, proudly presenting a nation's flag on ceremonious occasions. The same privilege is felt by soldiers who volunteer to be standard bearers in battle, bravely risking almost certain death in exchange for this noble service of leading the charge bearing the nation's flag. God's standard melds the colors of every nation, but it is no less an honor to be chosen for the color guard of Christ. We are mistaken if we presume the Prince of Peace was not born to fight: "I have come to light a fire on the earth!" John the Baptist learned that there is a price to be paid for the privilege of being a standard bearer for Christ. Justice and peacemakers like Martin Luther King are non-violent warriors who suffer in battle like any soldier. The practice has largely faded now, but there was a reason that bishops once lightly slapped confirmands on the cheek to commission them as "soldiers for Christ." Even as we bask in the peaceful strains of the Lord's birth, we must ready ourselves to fulfill our baptismal vow to resist evil by bearing the standards of justice, truth and love.

Prayer: God of every nation, steel our hearts to fight for the gospel and to bravely stand up for the truth.

Celebrating Advent in Color

These simple rituals offer ways for individuals or families to celebrate Advent creatively using the colors of the season.

Week 1: The Purple of Longing: In Advent we yearn for the truest gifts of God's coming. Make a "grownup Christmas list" by writing your deepest prayers, hopes and dreams on a piece of stationery. Roll up the paper, tie it with a purple ribbon and set it inside the Advent wreath or under your tree. Each day this week, light a purple candle and read one item with this Prayer:

Our souls wait for the Lord more than those who watch for the dawn.

Week 2: The Green of Life: The Jesse Tree tells the story of our life with God. Choose seven Jesse tree symbols (found easily on the internet) like Joseph's coat, the burning bush and the rainbow. Color them and on the back of each write an example of God's life-giving presence in your family. Each day this week hang one symbol on your tree and read this Prayer:

The favors of the Lord we will recall because of all the Lord has done for us.

Week 3: The Pink of Joy: Advent is the season for joy in the cold and roses in December. Read the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Buy a bag of small pink silk roses at a craft store or some fresh pink rose petals. Each day this week insert one silk rose into a strip of quilt batting on your mantle or under your crèche or scatter a few rose petals over it with this Prayer:

The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy.

Week 4: The White of Glory: We prepare to welcome the Light of the World by shining our own lights to guide the way. Place eight white candles in a bed of sand and light one candle the first night with this Prayer:

Your word is a lamp for our feet and a light to our path! Light one additional candle each night so the light grows. Make luminaria lanterns with the candles, sand and brown paper lunch bags to line your driveway on Christmas eve.

Christmas Day

A Master of Understatement

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.
—John 1:14



In our modern age of hyperbole, pizza is “awesome,” football games are “epic,” and pop stars are “legendary.” Meanwhile, everything in life is supersized, like a house boasting “tons of space” or a success that is “massive!” By contrast, the preferred style of the divine artist is understatement. Christmas and Easter are the two great masterpieces of heavenly artwork and both are depicted with a subtle brush rather than broad strokes of garish pomp. The birth of Christ includes herald angels, but the Nativity scene is dominated by a poor baby on a bed of straw surrounded by sheep and cattle. Not many were drawn to that humble sight at Bethlehem and perhaps even fewer would pay attention today. We have come to prefer spectacle over understatement, players charging onto a field flanked by cheerleaders with rock music blaring, fireworks blazing and jets roaring overhead. God owns the copyright on special effects, but chooses to extract riches from poverty, grandeur from simplicity and fullness from emptiness. Christ shed the trappings of glory to paint a masterpiece of divine love. Christmas is a day to gaze at that scene in wonder and praise the Master Painter of our salvation.

*Prayer: Newborn King, open our eyes to the artistry of your simple birth
and the richness of your human poverty.*