

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

Come Lord Set Us Free



Kathy McGovern

Our Daily Advent Prayer

Arise, Lord!

Why are you sleeping? Arise!

Do not make our exile final.

How can you turn your face from us?

How can you forget all our troubles?

We are pressed down to the earth itself.

Arise Lord! Help us.

Set us free. *Amen.*

—*Psalm 44:24-27*

Introduction

Born free. That's what we say about life in the United States. Throughout our history, we have been a nation that likes to think of ourselves as freedom lovers, and freedom fighters.

We want to live free, to vote free, and to stand up for freedom all over the world. And yet, the common responsorial psalm for Advent begs God to come and set us free. God (and the psalmist) clearly knows something about us that we don't. We aren't free.

We aren't free because there are parts of our hearts, and our personal history, that keep us bound. We aren't free because we are constricted by false sureties that keep us from the kingdom Jesus came to establish. We aren't free because we are tied to behaviors, and desires, and sad circumstances of our own choosing, that keep us from being the fully liberated human beings for whom Jesus came into the world.

C.S. Lewis said, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." Scripture knew that eons ago. "God has set eternity in our hearts," says Ecclesiastes 3:11. Our pulse is set to the rhythm of heaven. We won't be free until we align our lives with the Incarnate One, who knows the way to real freedom.

—Kathy McGovern

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Wake Up, People!

“It is the hour now for you to wake from sleep.” (Romans 13:11)

We were robbed several years ago. Our friend Karen, staying in our basement, heard someone coughing in our driveway. Her first thought was that she should go outside and investigate. Her second thought—thank God—was that her bed was cozy and warm and that she should go back to sleep.

My husband also heard coughing right outside our upstairs window at the same time. He got up and looked outside. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he considered getting up and going out, but, again, cozy and warm outbid chilly and cold.

We all compared notes in the morning, when we saw the ransacked garage and the broken-into cars. The intruders walked through our back yard because

our vigilant neighbors have a bright motion detector that would have gone off if they’d gone through the alley.

We got right on it, of course. We changed the code on the garage door and once again promised to remember to lock the garage door at night. Next time, we’ll be ready.

Which brings us, of course, to Advent, and St. Paul’s urgent warning that “now is the hour to awake from sleep.” Loud coughing right outside our window at midnight wasn’t alarming enough to rouse us. Sleep is so much more comforting than facing that which is urgently trying to wake us. But it’s Advent, and it’s time to wake up. Jesus, our Morning Star, is trying to rouse us.

What is Christ calling me to “wake up” to this Advent?

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If I Can Love, I'll Be Free

"Because of my relatives and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you.'"
(Psalm 122:8)

Right away we are warned to be vigilant, not to sleep through the urgent ways God is trying to get our attention. But how do we keep the radio on and tuned into the right station—the one where God's voice comes through loud and clear?

The only true freedom we know in this life is being connected to that Voice. But the dueling dialogs of the scriptures and the culture keep us ever at the tuner, going back and forth between what the Advent scriptures speak to us, and what our endlessly enticing culture says in rebuttal.

Television host Steven Colbert revealed to Jesuit Fr. James Martin on the Catholic talk show *Faith in Focus* (November 15, 2018) the prayer that he

prays each Sunday after receiving Communion: "If I can love, I'll be free. As I love you Lord, let this be."

Ah. So that's freedom. Love is the canon, the measuring rod. If we can find where love is

hiding—usually in plain sight—in the difficult relationships, the age-old conflicts, the misunderstandings and seemingly selfish actions of ourselves and others, we are on the road to being set free. Recently Pope Francis modeled this powerfully when, in a meeting with the president of South Sudan and the opposition leader, he knelt in front of each of them and kissed their feet. "Seek what unites you," he begged. "Remember that with war, all is lost." They were astonished, and speechless.

How will I use love to create inroads of peace in my family,
work and neighborhood ?

Pick a Gift, Any Gift

“And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”
(Colossians 3:14)

Around this time of year I find myself doing some cutting and rolling and tying of ribbons. Every year at Advent and on the Feast of the Holy Family (the first Sunday after Christmas) I like to make individual scrolls for each of the seven gifts of the Spirit—wisdom, counsel, understanding, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1-10;)—and of those virtues in which the Christian should be wrapped, like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, which we hear on the Feast of the Holy Family (Colossians 3:12-21).

It’s fun to type these up and find a good description of each, then wrap them up as scrolls and

pass them around at the beginning of Advent. I find that, as all things where the Spirit is leading, the scroll I pull from the basket is either the exact one I need for the year (like wisdom!) or one that I hadn’t thought I needed until I opened it up (like last year’s compassion).

Advent, with all its beginnings, is the perfect time to put one of these gifts on your frige, or maybe next to your computer, or at your prayer chair, or in your Bible. They frame the season, showing up at the beginning of Advent and the beginning of Christmas. Pray for that gift all through the year, and see how God will work.

What will I do with the gifts the Holy Spirit has given me to share?

To See Thee More Clearly

“At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face.”
(1 Corinthians 13:12)

The cultural transformations around the world this past year have felt like a tsunami of long-underground pressure that has finally forced its way up and out into the consciousness of those who have benefitted from the status quo for so long.

How did we not realize, we might ask ourselves, that, in the words of Lyndal Frazier-Cairns, “racism and sexism have undermined collective action through the ages”? How can it be that, all things being equal, there are still huge wage gaps in race and gender?

The veil that protects us from knowing things that might make us have to change is in the process of melting away. “On this

mountain,” says Isaiah, “God will destroy the web that is woven over all the nations. And he will destroy death forever” (Isaiah 25:7-8).

It’s scary to have to know things. It’s scary to acknowledge that those of us who benefit from structures tilted in our favor do so because others are left behind. It takes courageous people to stand in the current and say, like John the Baptist, “prepare the way of the Lord.”

The way of the Lord is always the way to freedom. The way of the Lord is always about bravely opening our eyes and letting in the truth, even when it costs us. It’s scary to be set free.

What troublesome truth is nudging me to acknowledge it and change?

What You Hear in the Dark

*“I will give you the treasures of darkness,
and riches hidden in secret places.” (Isaiah 45:3)*

It’s so dark outside these December days. Night comes early. Cold and chill set in. The snows come. Even though we live in the rhythm of the seasons, it’s hard to finally put fall away and turn our collars to the annual, long challenge of winter.

Some eventually say, “Enough, “and move to Florida or Arizona (which have their own unique weather calamities). But you can’t run from the dark. No matter where you live in the northern hemisphere, night will come early, and stay long. Adjusting to it is the annual Advent spiritual shift. We are meant to walk in the dark this time of year. We are meant to pull our coats in tight and let the dark speak.

Sometimes it’s the moon that speaks, that most subtle astronomical body that reflects a tiny portion of the sun’s light. We look up and see it, waxing and waning throughout the month, pulling the tides in and out. Sister Moon quietly hangs in the sky, silently giving witness that, even in deep December, the sun is ever with us.

The seed that’s fallen into the ground is already starting its secret stirring. It will remain hidden for months. But even though unseen, God sees it and is at work in the night, freeing it from death. Advent wants us, like the secret seed, to be set free. It’s a sacred work, a quiet work. It’s God’s own work.

From what habits or mindsets do I most need to be set free?

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You Knew?

*“Now Jacob has nothing to be ashamed of,
nor shall his face grow pale.” (Isaiah 29:22)*

There’s nothing like the feeling of doing the right thing. Sometimes that means losing the positive regard of people you like, or even a job you love. It’s hard, though, to see the behaviors that, at a later time, may make our children wonder why we weren’t more courageous.

The movie *Green Book* really brings this home beautifully. An older audience is left breathless, watching the true story of the slovenly Bronx bouncer Tony Vallelonga, hired in 1962 to drive the impeccably dressed African-American Don Shirley deep into the Jim Crow south for a series of concert tours. Can this country seriously have behaved this way in our own lifetimes?

The venues that hosted Dr. Shirley were, for the most part, compliant in providing Steinway pianos for the stage. It was incomprehensible to them, though, that the featured artist wouldn’t be grateful to use the outhouse for “coloreds” thoughtfully provided on the grounds.

It takes just a couple of these shocking insults for Tony to have a radical change of heart. At the beginning of the movie we watch him throw out two glasses used by black workers at his house. After his transformation, he stands up tall to the “gracious” host who won’t allow Dr. Shirley to eat in the dining room with his white guests.

What behaviors am I neglecting to attend to that I might regret later?

Be the Change

“Without cost you have received, without cost you are to give.”
(Matthew 10:8)

How’s your Advent going so far? Have you found a way to carve out silence in these super-saturated Saturdays before Christmas? The Salvation Army Santas ring out the cognitive dissonance of the season: take every opportunity to touch the lives of those who are poor, but do it amid the clanging cacophony of the mall.

That’s okay. Every culture has its weirdness. Materialism and crass commercialism are packaged so alluringly these days that it appears that compassion and generosity can sit right next to the latest iPhone on the store shelf, and everybody leaves feeling good. The truth is, in some cases they can.

We’ve actually come a long way in linking consumer goods with global issues. The “Shop for Good” campaigns, usually

rolled out the week before Advent, allow companies to choose craftsmanship over products that are mass-produced, and “mission aligned” companies over those whose only mission is the bottom line.

Groups like Oxfam, that rushes assistance to those in war-torn or storm-tossed areas of the world, or Charity Charge, that donates cash back to your chosen non-profits, raise our consciousness and connect us with the wider world.

Groups like Sustainable Fashion Alliance and Free the Slaves help us make the connection between the garment industry and the ethical choices we can make to help the environment and those whose lives are “owned” by factories and warehouses in the Third World.

What one change can I make in my purchasing choices this Advent season?

Preparing the Way

“Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”
(Matthew 3:8)

When I hear about John the Baptizer dunking Israelites in the Jordan, I remember a tender moment with a great lion of God who went home to heaven three years ago. No one loved Jesus and the Church more than Chuck, and no one was more receptive to the reforms of Vatican II than this eloquent Catholic lawyer.

But forty years ago, when he first observed the catechumens preparing for baptism being led from the church after the homily, he was outraged. “Well, I’m not standing for this. If they can’t stay for Communion, then neither can I. How dare I stay when they are being asked to leave?”

It took a few words of kind explanation from the our aux-

iliary Bishop George Evans to help Chuck understand that this was the new rite of initiation for converts to the faith. They are dismissed in front of us so they can go for catechesis together, and so we can pray for them every step of the way.

Chuck became the lead catechist in the parish, and led hundreds of new Christians to the baptismal font over the years. But I think he secretly liked the style of that wild, locust-eating Baptist, who dragged his own people—not those converting to Judaism, but lifelong, faithful Jews—out into the desert and got them to admit that they were sinners and needed a baptism of repentance.

Advent is such a reflective season. Listen carefully. A voice is crying out in the wilderness.

What might John the Baptist say to me today to change my life?

Let the Angel Gabriel Speak

“Then the angel departed from her.” (Luke 1:38)

I don't know why I startle people so much. I keep forgetting that earth creatures can't really see us. Those of us who have stood before the throne of God from all eternity don't really “see” the way you see. For archangels like Michael, Raphael, and me, the earthly and heavenly beings are always in our magnetic field.

The best part of being an angel is that I get to help people. I visited Daniel and helped him understand his dream. I visited Zechariah and told him that he and Elizabeth would have a son! But—forgive me if I get choked up here—the very best moment in my angelic missions was the day I visited Mary, the Mother of Jesus (blessed is she among women!)

Now, Archangel Michael protects you from the wickedness and snares of the devil (he's protected you a lot throughout your life). Archangel Raphael is a matchmaker (maybe he worked behind the scenes to make you a match). But I delivered the greatest birth announcement in the history of the world to your Mother Mary, and her “yes” set everything in motion.

No, I never visited her again. Not when Jesus was born, not when he was lost, not even on that terrible day when she stood at his cross. But she never forgot a single thing I said to her that day in Nazareth. And it's okay. She and I talk every day in heaven.

What moments of God's nearness do I most treasure in my heart?

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Love Is Where God Shows Up

*"Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God."
(Isaiah 40:1)*

Looking through my box of most cherished mementos recently, I read again some of the beautiful letters friends have sent me through the years, many on the occasion of the deaths of my parents, or as cards of support as I moved through one illness or another.

What a comfort they were then, but somehow they comfort me even more now. The gift of years has improved my understanding of how much effort and love goes into a truly compassionate note. In fact, to be "compassionate" is to "suffer with" someone, and as I read those letters I can see how much those I love suffered with me in my losses and pain.

Is your heart full today with sorrow for someone you love who is recently bereaved? Your love for that friend is the most powerful way God "shows up" in our lives. That we can weep for a friend's pain is the best sign of the incarnation in the world. God, who is pure love, inhabits us, and that love pulls out of us and goes straight to the heart of the bereaved. In the same way, God so loved the world.

Come, Lord, and set us free from any doubt that we are alone. Every day that we comfort the grieving we are living out your incarnation. True freedom is just connecting with our heart's impulse to love.

What impulse to love have I been most trying to squelch?

Welcoming the Immigrant

*“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)*

Here’s an Advent story that invites us into the freedom of following the gospel. Last year, thanks to a superb class on migration that my parish offered, I met the 2019 version of Dorothy Day. Sarah Jackson is a beautiful, smart, accomplished thirty-something woman who, like Dorothy, saw the plight of the suffering and was unable to turn away.

What started several years ago as almost a lark, an interesting road trip to the U.S.—Mexico border, ended up a life-altering experience. She spoke with people at the border and learned of the horrific pressures in their countries of origin that compelled them to risk everything now instead of waiting in order to be legally admitted years later.

Back home, she bought a

house one mile from the immigrant detention center. Like Dorothy Day, she lives in the home and provides warmth, clean clothes and good food for those who arrive hungry and cold. An army of volunteers drives those who have been newly-released to her home (now called Casa de Paz), helps them get legal services, connects them with relatives, keeps the garage stocked with clothes and the kitchen stocked with food.

It’s interesting that the first missionary commands of Jesus are not “go out into the world,” but “follow me,” and “come to me.” We learn hospitality from the Master, who welcomed the unwelcome, and only after we’ve learned it well are we trusted to leave our borders to teach it to others.

How can I show compassion and help those who are seeking a new life in the U.S.?

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Finding the Origin Story

“How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?”
(Luke 1:34)

I wonder about Mary, the mother of Jesus. I wonder about her background, and if the visit by Gabriel that day shook her to her core. Was she, in some ways, preparing from her earliest childhood for some kind of angelic encounter? The non-biblical book often called the Infancy Gospel of James, written sometime in the middle of the second century AD, fills in the many gaps that existed then and now about the hidden life of Mary before the Annunciation.

In this wildly popular document we learn an alternate story. The gospel of Luke tells us that she lived in Nazareth. The Infancy Gospel of James recounts that her father (named Joachim) was a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, and that Mary was tak-

en there by him and her mother (Anna) when she was a young child. There, Mary (*Miriam* is the Hebrew name) made a profession of perpetual virginity as a vow of dedication to God.

The reason a story like this was so important to the early Christians is that there probably already existed a belief that Mary was a perpetual virgin, but there was no scripture to back that up. Hence, this gospel “appeared” to fill in the gaps. It was deemed “suspicious” from the start, but it was widely known, and even today the names of Mary’s parents, which are only found in this document, are used for their feast day on July 26 and are referenced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Tradition and Scripture, in this case, sit happily together

How has my journey of faith combined my past and present beliefs?

Misery Loves Misery

“We played the flute for you, but you did not dance.” (Matthew 11:17)

Since we are focusing on true freedom this Advent, let’s talk for a minute about what it would be like to be freed from the instinct to criticize. The general election is still nearly a year away, but we’re already saturated with “wise” people telling us everything that could possibly be wrong with some (one hopes) good people.

We’re all experts at it, now that we’ve learned how to be “snarky” on social media. Have you noticed that it’s easy to imagine yourself cleverly clicking off the failings of your friends, while adoring audiences applaud your insight? Ha! All that ugliness in politics and on social media has only made it even less likely that anyone is listening at all, gathering up, as they are, their own witty and caustic reply.

I think we’re tired of it. I think the Advent heart longs for kindness and truth, justice and peace. I think we long to give each other many second chances, cognizant as we are of the thousands of times our friends and family members have graciously forgiven (and quietly overlooked) our own inconsistencies and annoying behaviors.

Jesus must have felt like a hounded presidential candidate. He ate and drank, and his detractors called him a glutton and a drunk. John the Baptist fasted and lived a penitential life in the desert, and they called him demon possessed. Why was Jesus such a target? Because he was inviting them into freedom, and that was too uncomfortable. It still is.

What spiritual discipline will I exercise in order to cease being too critical?

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Re-connecting with Joy

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” (Revelation 3:20)

Here’s another Advent invitation: what would it be like to be freed from the addicting time-wasters the internet is so cunning at luring us into, even at the expense of time with our kids? The reflective person surely grasps the ways the senses are recruited to form pleasurable pathways just through the acts of pointing and clicking. What brilliant marketing!

More and more studies are proving, though, that if teenagers will just put down their phones for an afternoon, they remember the fun of playing ball and board games, with actual, non-virtual friends. Lengthen the experiment to an entire weekend and these courageous teens will forget their phones at home. Doesn’t that sound, well, heavenly?

How did we get so far away from each other so fast? How did we so happily forget that we are made to be in actual relationship with actual people? Standing on a subway platform in Long Island City on a Monday morning recently, I was stunned at the silence. Shouldn’t this be one of the noisiest places in the world at the beginning of the work week? The only sound was the click, click of phones, the only eye-contact the one between user and screen.

“Here I am,” says God, in so many places in scripture. “If you seek me, you’ll find me.” “Draw near to God, who will draw near to you.” The God of our longing is calling to us, even now. What freedom to be untethered, unbound.

How does my relationship—or lack of one—with nature and with friends mirror my relationship with God?

Don't Forget to Remember

*“Then the shepherds returned,
glorifying God for what they had heard and seen.” (Luke 2:20)*

Do you feel like you're stuck in a holding pattern? Have you prayed the same prayers for years, with little or no sign of an answer? If you're nodding your head and saying, "Yes, Yes, Yes," then this is your season. Advent is your seedtime. You may never see the harvest in your life. But your prayers are in some awesome company.

John the Baptist is an Advent saint. Locked up in Herod's dungeon, we can imagine that he looked back at his ministry at the Jordan and wondered whether he had it right or not. Israel was lousy with false prophets. He himself had railed against them. And yet, chained in and far away from the desert stars, he may have feared that he

had thrown his life away for no good reason.

His disciples carried his prison prayer to Jesus: "Are you the One who is to come?" You can feel Jesus' love traveling faster than the speed of light from the Galilee into the Jordan Valley and right into John's cell. "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind regain their sight. The lame walk."

Have you, over time, experienced the healing of an illness, the reconciliation of a broken relationship, the growing out of an addiction or an immature behavior? *Go and tell someone what you've heard and seen.* It may be the message they've been longing to receive while they themselves are in chains.

Who can I tell what I have heard and seen about God's healing presence in my life?

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From Advent to Advent

*“There is an appointed time for everything,
and a time for every affair under the heavens.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)*

It doesn't seem like the world is getting any better, but that can't be right. Just a brief look at history reminds us that the Black Death alone killed 75 million people in 1350. The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 killed 50 million people. The “Long Peace” that has avoided a third world war continues to extend, with encouraging consequences. Even homicides are way down worldwide from years ago. How awful if those graphs showed the opposite, that disease and war were killing more people today than ever before.

Advent calls these questions to mind more than other seasons because it's so circular (like the Advent wreath). It's our annual do-over of the salvation story. We begin with the prophetic

oracles that tell of a coming age of peace. Then, as the season accelerates, we hear the Gospel accounts of the events that occurred directly before the birth of Christ.

The year then unfolds through the Christmas Season, a few weeks of Ordinary Time, Lent, the Easter season, and the long thirty-something weeks of Ordinary Time. Then, turn around and it's Advent again.

It reminds me of that poem “The Dash” by Linda Ellis. She tells of a man who gave the eulogy at a funeral, giving the dates of his friend's birth and death. But it was the dash separating those dates that told the tale of his existence. Our story is told in betwixt and between the Advents of our lives.

How have I become more deeply connected with Christ during this Advent?

The Freedom of the Children of God

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)*

A couple of years ago I did some DNA testing. I now know that—surprise—all my ancestors are from Ireland. I could have told you that by glancing at any photograph from either side of our decidedly non-diverse family.

Tribal memory and identity were the starting point for the biblical writers. In fact, Matthew begins his proclamation of the good news by telling us, through three sets of fourteen generations, exactly who begat who, and how the birth of each child set up the pattern for the next, and the next, right up to the birth of Jesus.

Now, a photograph of that clan would not necessarily cause anyone to say, “Oh, that family resemblance!” Unlike modern-

day Cohen men—or *kohanim*, the priestly tribe—who can trace their roots and, yes, their DNA markers all the way back to Aaron, the genealogy of Jesus is a long and winding road of jaw-dropping ethnic detours.

Jesus is descended from kings, but only because of the insertion in the family story of Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Even tracing the lineage to Joseph, Mary’s spouse, is odd, since the text goes on to tell that Joseph is not the natural father of Jesus.

But must not the Messiah be of pure Jewish lineage? Jesus, descending from Jewish men and some Gentile women, freed all of us from the limiting barriers of racial identity.

How might my behavior change by realizing that Jesus
represents every race and nation?

The Nearness of Christ

*“No, the Word is very near to you,
in your mouth and in your heart.” (Deuteronomy 30:14)*

There are many times when we decide to pitch our tent with someone. It might be that first friend we make in the neighborhood when we're six. We go to their house, we play in their yard, and over the years we have a million secret jokes between us. The next thing we know, we are holding their newborn at the baptismal font or standing with them at their father's funeral. We have pitched our tent with them.

Our parents pitched their tents with us. They overlooked our squirrely behavior when we were kids and our surly behavior when we were teenagers. In good times and in bad, they pitched their tents with us, even when they must have longed for

the privacy of their own five-star hotel.

I suppose that, having pitched your tent, if you didn't like your spot you could tear it down and set up in a nicer part of the campground, but who wants a friend like that? The people who are worth keeping are the ones who stay close when we're a mess and when we're put together, when we're young and when we're old, even when we're loyal and not so loyal.

“And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling (*pitched his tent*) among us” (John 1:14). What a perfect image for a people who camped in the desert for forty years. Jesus, please let us sense your nearness to us in the deserts of our lives.

Who has pitched their tent with me throughout my life? With what results?

Come, O Long Expectant Jesus

“See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.” (James 5:7)

Composers Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman wrote a beautiful song for the movie *Mary Poppins Returns* called “Where the Lost Things Go.” It is a wistful, poignant ballad about longing for the people we’ve lost, but recognizing that they are never really gone. My favorite lyric is, “Spring is like that now, far beneath the snow, hiding in the place where the lost things go.”

In Advent time we measure the darkening days with candles and wreaths to keep the light alive, lest we succumb to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), that is, where we feel like Narnia before Aslan redeems it, when it’s “always winter, never Christmas.”

Unlike those generations of Hebrews who watched for the

Messiah, but never found him, we know when he came, and how he came, and even why he came. And we know his incarnation is ever changing the world.

But there are days when we wonder, aren’t there? If someone we love has been taken from us, or is sick, or if we can’t watch the news one more second, we wonder how the Incarnation has really changed anything after all.

“Be not afraid,” God told the Hebrews in the desert, and Joshua before the battle, and Elijah before confronting the king, and the captives in Babylon before their liberation. “Be not afraid,” Jesus said to his disciples, and to nearly everyone who came to him for healing.

Spring is hiding, yes, but it is merely out of our sight. It is never gone.

How is my life different because I believe that God will never leave me?

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Help for New Parents

“May it be done to me according to your word.” (Luke. 1:38)

One of the thousands of inspiring and effective charitable groups out there is an organization called “Gently Hugged.” This is a fun and creative way to help parents with the financial challenges of their baby’s first year of life. It takes an army of volunteers, but this organization doesn’t have to beat the bushes for helpers. This is an outreach everybody loves.

Take Poway, California, for example. Every week a number of people collect bags and bags of new or “gently hugged” baby clothes from drop-off centers around town. Then another group goes through every piece of clothing, discarding anything that’s soiled or torn. They then organize the clothes into sizes, genders (if applicable), and seasons.

Another group takes these selected bags home to wash, dry, and fold every piece of clothing. This is a huge job, done every week. Those bags are then brought to another group that distributes them to hospitals and social services. The social workers, in particular, are thrilled to have beautiful new clothes to give to grateful parents.

I think of this group during Advent, especially reflecting on Mary’s “fiat,” her yes, that changed her life completely. She and Joseph courageously brought Jesus to birth, and protected him from Herod’s malevolent intent. They had to leave the country to do that. Try this. Think of any new parents you know, and do what you can to help them, in the name of Jesus, the child of the poor.

How might I find ways to help new parents this coming year?

Freedom Comes in Baby Steps

*“Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea
and the birds of the air.” (Genesis 1:26)*

It only took me fifteen years, but I have finally formed a new habit. Way back in 2004 I loaded up my trunk with all kinds of pretty canvas bags to take with me into the grocery store. Every single time I went into the store—that’s about 2,140 times—I forgot to bring them in. Of course, by the time I was in the checkout lane it was too late to go back and get them.

What finally formed this new habit of remembering to bring in the bags? Peer pressure, of course. The most helpful was the day my friend graciously did my grocery shopping for me. She arrived at the house with about six canvas bags full of groceries. I cringed, hoping

she wouldn’t go into the kitchen and see the mountain of plastic bags multiplying in the corner.

Now that I have finally formed this new habit I feel so free. I don’t have to slink to my car, loaded with plastic bags, hoping our super-green neighbors don’t see me as they arrive at the store on—of course—their bikes. Baby steps. I’ll never come close to their example, but I’m happy with my progress.

It’s a small thing, but being more intentional about this one habit is already helping me break out of other habits that have made me unhappy through the years. That’s what I’m learning; the more good habits I create, the freer I become.

What new habit do I most want to form this year?

God Breaks Through in Our Ordinary Lives

“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

Sometimes the most fruitful seasons of our lives are the ones where we are anxious or afraid. Maybe we’re waiting for the biopsy results to come back. Maybe we’re struggling in a class we have to pass or in a job we have to keep. Maybe we’re praying for a love to come into our lives, or into the lives of those we care about.

If we have been nurtured in the faith, we might notice that, out of the blue, “signs” open up to us from the most unlikely places. We might be praying for a sick friend, and the perfect song comes on the radio. Suddenly we are filled with the assurance that God is near, that God is actively communicating with us in our prayer.

In his book *Miracles*, Eric Metaxas cites numerous examples of people who were lifted from depression, or doubt, or deep anxiety through the intervention of a phone call, a song, a billboard sign, or even a bumper sticker that came into their consciousness at just the right moment.

The important thing here is that, of course, these songs and signs were with us for years before, but when our hearts were cracked open with sorrow or worry, God seized the opportunity of our broken hearts to walk right in, via these everyday “sacramentals.” All of a sudden, the ordinary becomes a direct contact with the Incarnate God, who promises to be with us always, to the end of the world.

What experience of “signs” from God have been most important in my life?

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Joseph's Side of the Story

"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us." (Isaiah 9:5)

I have to admit, I was dreading it. Not the birth! No, Mary and I were thrilled to have been chosen for this most mysterious way our God (blessed be the Name!) had decided to enter into the world. We were beside ourselves with excitement to see just what God was up to, using such humble instruments as us.

But I dreaded making that trip to Bethlehem. Wouldn't you know, the exact time the baby was due was the time we had to get to Bethlehem to be enrolled? Caesar Augustus decided he needed to have a count of everyone in all his province—for taxes, I'm sure—and that meant we had to make that ninety-mile trip just when Mary was huge,

and uncomfortable, and ready to give birth any minute.

This was different from the trip that Mary made to see Elizabeth up in the Judean hill country, right after the Angel Gabriel visited her. She was tiny then, and there weren't millions of people traveling! Nine months later, we were jostled and pushed around by caravans of travelers all the way.

The other thing was the bandits. I wasn't taking any chances. I paid one of the trade caravans to let us travel with them. That was also some protection from the lions and bears that prowl around in the forested valley of the Jordan River. We made it, of course, for God who is mighty has done great things!

How does the behavior of St. Joseph most inspire me?

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Christmas Is for Dreamers

"That Pharaoh had the same dream twice means that the matter has been confirmed by God and that God will soon bring it about."

(Genesis 41:32)

I hope you dream when you sleep, and I hope God sometimes visits you in those dreams. The truth is, if Joseph, that ancient son of Jacob, hadn't been a dreamer, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all. God gave Joseph dreams that came true. Yes, in fact, his brothers and his father *did* bow down to him, just as he had dreamt, many years later when he, after years of suffering in Pharaoh's dungeon, was raised up to be the governor of Egypt, the Bread Basket of the world. His family came to Egypt hungry, and he was in a position to feed them. They bowed down.

About 1600 years later another Joseph, descendant of King David, the spouse of Mary, the mother of Jesus, had dreams too. An angel appeared to him in a dream and told him the true story of how it was that Mary had conceived a child. Later, after the birth, an angel told him to take Mary and child to Egypt. After it was safe to return home, an angel once again appeared in his dream, and the holy family set out for Nazareth. And it is to that son that we bow down.

Come to us, lover of our hearts! Come to us, Lord Jesus! Come to us, child of our dreams.

What dreams, waking or sleeping,
have most stayed with me throughout my life?

The God of Surprise

“See, I am doing something new!

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

In my long life, filled with big families, legions of friends, and armies of students, I don’t know one single person whose life has turned out the way they planned. In fact, who would have possibly imagined the upheaval—most for good, some for ill—that technology alone has wrought in the past thirty years?

I don’t know anyone who imagined that their marriage could fail, or their kids would struggle with addictions, or that the Church they love would be rocked to its foundations.

I’ll bet you know several people who fall into each of those categories today. Cultural shifts and economic pressures have changed the way we live, and we’ve adapted. For many, life has thrown some significant curve

balls that have thrown them off their lifelong career course. For others, out-of-the-blue health challenges have rerouted their finances, their schedules, their life goals.

This is the season for everyone who says, “This was not how I thought my life would work out at all. I had to change my plans, but God has pitched tent with me and is with me every step of the way.” Zechariah saw Gabriel and changed his plans for his old age. Shepherds saw the angels and changed their hearts. Astrologers saw the star and changed direction. Joseph saw an angel in his dream and changed countries. Mary saw Gabriel and changed the world. That’s how history works with God, the great Change Artist.

What changes in my life have set me on a more challenging,
yet more rewarding path?

The Witness of the Martyrs

*“You will be hated by all because of my name,
but whoever endures to the end will be saved.” (Matthew 10:22)*

One of the jarring rhythms of the Christmas season is that, no sooner do we celebrate the birth of Jesus, with its stories of shepherds, and angels, and innkeepers, and mothers, and babies, and—in a couple of weeks—exotic visitors, then we are immediately thrust into the memorials of the martyrs.

St. Stephen comes first, the very day after Christmas. We remember him right away because he is the first person we know of who actually died for the faith. His stoning at the hands of the so-called Synagogue of the Freedmen is a cautionary tale. He was preaching the freedom of the cross to an enraged group of “religious” people who couldn’t bear to hear another word. They chased him out of the city and killed him. Saul,

as you recall, held their coats as they murdered him (Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59).

Two days later we commemorate the Holy Innocents, those baby boys murdered by the paranoid King Herod because he feared that the new “King of the Jews” that the Magi were looking for when they came to Jerusalem would one day revolt against him and take his throne.

This is Christmas? What happened to sleigh bells and Santa Claus, chestnuts and snowmen? Well, we sing our beautiful Christmas carols all the way through the Baptism of the Lord, of course. But, as David Haas wrote so beautifully in his hymn, “Now We Remain,” we hold the death of the Lord deep in our hearts.

How have I experienced both birth and death
in my life this Advent and Christmas?

Comfort and Joy

“Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” (Hebrews 13:2)

The most memorable Christmas Eve of my life was 1982, when a hundred-year blizzard roared through Denver. By noon the snow was raging from the heavens, and by 3pm every Christmas Eve service in town was cancelled.

Sure enough, those of us working in parishes were enroute to work that day and, in a pre-cell-phone world, never got the message that we should get home fast. My friend Jack, the associate pastor, maneuvered his car over to my neighborhood, and together we set out for the parish, a mere four miles away. It took about three hours for us to arrive.

What a mess. We got at least two feet of snow, most of it piled up in front of the en-

trances to the rectory and the church. Nobody was coming to church tonight. We weren't going anywhere either, and all the marooned staffers began making do with leftovers from the fridge and blankets and pillows from the couches.

We were grimly settling in for a long, cold night when—could it be?—the rectory doorbell rang. There, standing in the freezing darkness, were the beaming faces of our friends Jan and Charlie, who, sensing that the parish staff could really use some company, put their skis on and trekked about eight blocks to bring us Christmas cookies and homemade soup. I've never been happier to see anybody in my whole life. Gifts of the Magi, indeed.

In what ways am I resolved to radiate only light this year?

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Help Us Get Ready, Lord

*“Let the one who thirsts come forward,
and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water.”*
(Revelation 22:17)

Hopefully this Advent has helped us consider more closely at the ways we need to be set free. If we only stay within the safety of the media that think like we do, and the friends who look like we do, we will never know the exhilarating freedom of finally understanding why so many others are knocking on the doors of our hearts. It's scary to open the door to their knocking. We may have to change some things.

As the child of the poor, lying in a manger, or as the grown man, crying out from the cross, Jesus was the most perfectly free person in human history. We expected a prince; he came as a pauper. We demanded a perfect Jewish pedigree; he came as the

perfect hybrid of many ethnic groups. We expected him to rout our occupiers, call out their sins, and cleanse the holy lands; his cousin John took us to the desert to name and cleanse the sickness of our own souls.

The enemies of freedom—small mindedness, dubious “traditions” that keep some on top and the rest on the bottom, ethnic stereotypes, ways of living and consuming that keep many in actual slavery, and the lack of courage to call out real injustice—will be unmasked. And so, because we long to be set free from our own short-sightedness, we echo the words of nearly the last verse of the last book of the Bible and say, “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20)

Who in my life most needs the freedom that comes from Christ?

All Creatures Great and Small

“An ox knows its owner, an ass its master’s manger.” (Isaiah 1:3)

All animals genuflect at Midnight on Christmas Eve. And all animals can talk from midnight to dawn on Christmas morning! You can look it up.

Isn’t that a lovely thought, that somehow animals know, and kneel, at the hour traditionally believed to be the birth of Christ? The Native Americans in Canada—perhaps inspired by the Jesuit martyr Father Jean de Brébeuf, who in 1642 wrote the beautiful “Huron Christmas Carol” for them—say that every year on Christmas Eve the deer in the forest genuflect to honor the Great Spirit.

Why can’t animals talk all the time? A 1970 animated Christmas movie, *The Night the Animals Talked*, proposed that the animals who shared the barn with baby Jesus that night were

given the gift of speech, but right away they started bickering. By the time they figured out they were supposed to go out to tell everyone in the town that Jesus was born they had lost their powers and the message went undelivered.

In the lovely children’s Christmas hymn “The Friendly Beasts,” we learn that each of the animals (including the sheep that came along with the shepherds!) contributed their own unique gift to help Mary and Jesus that night.

The common thread in these pious and sweet traditions is that with the birth of Jesus came freedom—so universal that even beasts of burden can remember and genuflect and talk. The hopes and fears of all the years were met in Him that night.

From what do I most want the Lord to set me free during this coming year?

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