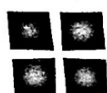


exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF DECEMBER 2017

VOLUME 28 | NUMBER 3 | WRITTEN BY Alice Camille



OPENING PRAYER

We begin again: to plan and to hope, to dream and to ponder, to ask and to accept, to thank and to praise. As we embrace this new Church year, O generous God, help us to seek wise paths and holy companions. We make this prayer through Emmanuel, our live-in Lord. *Amen.*

December 3 | LECTIONARY 2B FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BE ON THE LOOKOUT!

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7

Would that you might meet us doing right, that we were mindful of you in our ways!

"Watch me, watch me!" How small children love the attention of their parents! Whether they're doing a gymnastic tumble on the living room floor, or performing in a preschool recital, kids are hungry for praise and approval. The older we get, the less needy we may be for that unblinking eye of parental vigilance. In fact, there are times when most of us sincerely hope we're not observed, even by strangers. While we appreciate recognition in the moment of triumph, we'd prefer anonymity in the hour of embarrassment.

Having an all-seeing God, therefore, can be a disquieting thought. God is aware of our shining virtues and horrific moral failures alike. Yet, like an attentive parent, God is in our corner, rooting for us to succeed. Consider this Advent a season for fresh starts and second chances.

» *At the end of an eventful year, how am I most in need of a new beginning?*

SECOND READING

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of Jesus.

Speaking of beginning again: how about a reset of optimism as Advent begins? St. Paul tells us that, in Christ, we lack no spiritual gift. Why does it feel, so often, that we do? As we recall the litany of gifts we received at Confirmation—wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, courage, reverence, and wonder—it can seem like we're shy of at some of these daily. A gift unopened isn't terribly useful. Why not "unwrap" the spiritual gift you need most and find out what it can do for you?

If wisdom seems lacking, find a mentor. If knowledge is in want, take a class, read a spiritual book. Spiritual direction and therapy offer counsel. Courage is a muscle that requires exercise to build it up. The full complement of gifts is in you, ready to serve.

» *Organize the spiritual gifts as they're utilized in your life, from greatest to least. What's at the bottom? How can you redeem that gift for service?*

GOSPEL

MARK 13:33-37

"Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come."

How much of our lives do we spend asleep? Literally, about a third. But practically speaking, a great deal more than that. Our routines dull our appreciation of life, as we wander on autopilot through our responsibilities. We rarely "Chop wood! Fetch water!" in the ecstasy of Buddhist monks who practice making every act both a prayer and a celebration. We eat many meals without tasting our food, slump numbly in front of the computer or television hardly aware of what's in front of us.

Make a pledge this Advent season: to be aware, awake, and alive. Walk with a purpose, feeling the movement in your muscles and bones, body, and blood. Lift your gaze and notice what's around you. Listen to the person talking to you. Feel your feelings. Breathe.

» *Consider keeping an Advent journal. Write down what you see, feel, and think with a renewed attention to the gift of life.*

December 10 HOMECOMING

LECTIONARY 5B
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 40:1-5, 9-11

A voice cries out: In the desert, prepare the way of the LORD!

Holiday seasons and homecomings go hand in hand. From Thanksgiving through the New Year, a lot of us are either preparing to receive guests or to be guests ourselves. The price of travel goes up this time of year, and traffic earns the description of bustling. If only all roads were straightened, valleys raised, and mountains lowered so the journeys involved wouldn't be as troublesome.

The journey Isaiah predicts will be long, difficult, and costly. But the joyful destination is worth every step it takes to get there, as an exiled nation sets its sights on home. Contrast this happy ending with the dilemma of our generation's exiles: refugees of war or famine, broken economies and political instability. "Home" seems neither behind nor ahead of them. How can mountains be made low for these sisters and brothers of ours?

» *Today is the 70th anniversary of the first International Human Rights Day. How can we make home a reality for those who have none?*

SECOND READING

2 PETER 3:8-14

We await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

One of my favorite lines in the Letter to the Hebrews relates to this reading: "Here we do not have a lasting city. We seek a home that is yet to come." The home we await in faith has a lot of names: the reign of God, Kingdom Come, the New Creation. By any other name, the new heavens and earth up ahead will be worth the wait.

Waiting isn't always easy. If we're expecting something wonderful, our eagerness makes us impatient, restless, hoping that time will flash forward to the moment of our longing. If what we await is dreaded, we may become physically ill from the stress of anticipation. If the future event is uncertain, anxiety may fill the void as we hope against hope for a good outcome. Happily for us, Advent is a season of joyful waiting. On the near side of our expectation is Christmas. On the far side is everything we've ever dreamed of coming true.

» *On what are your hopes fastened this Advent season?*

GOSPEL

MARK 1:1-8

And this is what John proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me."

It's not Advent until the Baptist shows up. John is the advance man of Israel's hoped-for era of liberation. The Jewish community was on the lookout for someone like Elijah to roll out the red carpet of the messianic era. Observant Jews still leave an empty chair for Elijah at the table today. John the Baptist, so to speak, sat down in that chair quite brazenly. His wild appearance made him seem Elijah-like enough to convince a lot of people that God's hour had arrived. And so had the freedom they were hoping for.

Like any good advance man, John doesn't present himself as the main event. He keeps pointing outward, to the mighty one on the way. We too should never be fooled into thinking religion is the point of itself, or that religious leaders are the ones we follow. Jesus is the way. The rest is helpful signage to get us on the road.

» *Who have been forerunners to your faith: family members, teachers, friends, saints?*

December 17 O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL

LECTIONARY 8B
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

ISAIAH 61:1-2A, 10-11

God has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor.

You can't have Advent without John the Baptist. But it's just as difficult to imagine the season without Isaiah. His prophecies are called "the fifth Gospel"—only, Isaiah's telling the story of Jesus in advance rather than after the fact, which is quite a feat! This proto-evangelist predicts an era of

beatitude for the poor, healing and freedom and rescue. It can seem like this BC prophet had a time machine that allowed him a privileged glimpse of coming attractions.

What we learn from Isaiah most of all is that every generation waits in joyful hope for something: a time of prosperity or better leadership; the arrival of justice, peace, or moral courage. The only way to embrace the era of our longing is to first imagine it. Isaiah had the vision thing going in his favor. What vision do you

hold out for the future, and what are you willing to do to get there?

» *Make a list of things about the present reality that need to change. Name one thing you can do to bring that change into being.*

SECOND READING

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

Rejoice always. Pray without