

First Week of Advent—Hope

Reading

Luke 1:26–38

Reflection

“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” (vv. 31–32)

Mary stood as the messenger told her what to expect. This dream of God loomed far from the everyday realities that Mary faced—the brittle ground, the stubborn rocks, the pounding sun, and the dry air. Yet Gabriel lodged a hope in Mary that she could not resist. After the visit, when Mary looked to the horizon, she imagined something else ahead of her. Her perspective transformed. Though Mary lived a bleak existence of servitude, she would be the mother of God. Though she labored under the rule of Rome, her son’s reign would have no end. As the months wore on, that hope kept fluttering in Mary’s womb, along with a deep hunger.

We live into that hope this Advent season. Like an itch that cannot quite be reached, we know that the world is not what it ought to be, but we see glimpses of God’s dream. Those glimpses spark longing in us, a longing to be God’s beloved community.

Lighting

As we light the candle of hope, we open ourselves God’s possibilities. We enter into the Advent season, watching for sparks of God’s reign, a time when peace will endure forever.

(Light the first candle.)

Prayer

God of possibilities, help us to see beyond the horizon as we hope for the world as it ought to be. Create in us a hunger and thirst for you. Amen.

Second Week of Advent—Peace

Reading

Luke 1:39–45, 56

Reflection

[Mary] entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. (vv. 40–41)

In the Jewish tradition people often greeted one another with "*shalom*," a word that meant "peace, harmony, and wholeness." That sense of wholeness enveloped Mary as she arrived at Elizabeth's warm home and felt Elizabeth's embrace.

In some ways Mary's life had been shattered, for her pregnancy kept her in constant danger. Yet all the broken pieces came together in Elizabeth's arms. Elizabeth knew Mary's past, welcomed her present condition, and longed for her miraculous future. With that enfolding, the truth that Mary had been holding so close suddenly echoed in Elizabeth's words: "Blessed are you among women." Mary felt whole and at peace.

We walk in peace this Advent despite our own shattered lives—our broken relationships, stress, or depression. For peace is a wholeness that comes, not when life is perfect or safe, but when we begin to understand that it is in God that we move and breathe and have our being. We nurture peace, knowing that even in our brokenness, we live in the womb of God.

Lighting

We light the candle of peace, proclaiming God's wholeness in a broken world. We long for the day when we beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when we will learn war no more.

(Light the first and second candle.)

Prayer

God of peace, grant us serenity and wholeness in this Advent season. When our lives are shattered, help us to sense your embrace. Amen.

Third Week of Advent—Joy

Reading

Luke 1:46–57

Reflection

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” (vv. 46–47)

When John kicked in Elizabeth’s womb, Mary proclaimed how her spirit rejoiced! We know that John’s jolt will be just the beginning of the joy that the two women will feel—for their days will soon be filled with the exhausting delights of parenting.

Mary will experience the elation of holding her child close to her. She will thrill as Jesus turns over, lifts his head, learns to crawl, and takes a step. Each clumsy march will fill Mary with pleasure. Mary will relish seeing Jesus discover the world, his face shining with awe and amazement. She will be on guard as Jesus explores his surroundings with his incoming teeth, then she will introduce him to creation as he asks countless questions. Every day Mary will experience the joy of seeing Jesus grow in wisdom and stature as the truth of his life and actions point to the Creator.

We share in the delight of Advent as we encounter children around us and when we can be like children ourselves, rejoicing in light and laughter.

Lighting

We light the candle of joy, and take pleasure in the Spirit’s surprising jolts. May the glimmering light remind us to taste and see that God is good.

(Light the first, second, and third candles. If you have a pink candle, you may light it on this third Sunday.)

Prayer

God of joy, awaken us to the rapture of your abundant life. Help us to savor what we touch, taste, smell, and hear this Advent season. Amen.

Fourth Week of Advent—Love

Reading

Luke 2:1–6

Reflection

While they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. (v. 6)

Her body aching, her muscles sore, Mary looked at Joseph's calloused hands and kind eyes with expectation. For the time had come and Joseph was going to help deliver this child. With the firm and gentle caresses that could massage cedar bark until it felt like silk, Joseph soothed the fear and grief at the realization that Mary was going to have to give birth in a barn with plenty of bleating animals in attendance but no midwife.

Whenever their eyes met as Joseph gathered the supplies they would need for the birth, Mary's heart filled with gratitude for his patience. For Joseph had hidden her for many months to ensure her safety. And during that frightening time, Mary's love for her fiancé grew. Now her love was so large, she imagined it could encompass the world. As Joseph settled Mary onto the hay, the smell of the dry grass itched her nose. Mary knew that Jesus would be born—not in a sterile setting with medical experts close at hand—but in a world of love.

This fourth Sunday of Advent, in our preparations for Christ's birth may we sense the love of God, of our friends, and of our community surrounding us.

Lighting

We light this candle and open ourselves to God's abiding love. May the glow remind us of the adoration that the Holy One has for us.

(Light the first, second, third, and fourth candles.)

Prayer

O God, help us to create a world of love as we await Christ's arrival. Teach us how to mend broken relationships, let go of bitter disputes, and restore our affections. Amen.

Christmas Day

Reading

Luke 2:7

Reflection

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (v. 7)

Jesus came into this world crying out, and no doubt his parents marveled at his strong lungs, tiny fingers, and unfocused eyes. Mary held him so close that she could feel him inhaling and exhaling. In their exhaustion Jesus and Mary slept, and the rhythmic movements of Jesus' breathing lulled both of them. When Jesus cried, Mary looked down on his fragile flesh and she knew that he was the Christ, which means the anointed one.

To anoint someone, to pour oil over their head, was to acknowledge the transfer of power. Whether it was a transfer of courage, healing, an inheritance, or a reign, that person was called forth and set apart through the act of anointing. The oil that flowed from Samuel's horn to anoint David continues to pour throughout time when we recognize Jesus as the Christ.

By our Christmas celebrations, we mark the fulfillment of our longings and the substance of our hope. For Jesus Christ is "God with us."

Lighting

We light the Christ candle, with the assurance that hope will be fulfilled, peace will reign, joy will abound, and love will abide. For God has taken on flesh and dwells among us.

(Light the first, second, third, and fourth candles, as well as the Christ candle, with is the one in the center—or the largest one.)

Prayer

Anointed One, on this day of joy illuminate us so that we might understand your mystery. As we celebrate your birth, may we be born again by your Spirit. Amen.