

### First Sunday of Advent

ISAIAH 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9; MARK 13:33-37

# Stooping Down

*...we are the clay and you our potter...*

ISAIAH 64:7

*Deus ex machina* is when an author puts her characters in a difficult situation and then solves the crisis by having some external force swoop in, fixing everything.

In the verse before today's reading, Isaiah indicates that's what he wanted: "the nations would tremble before you." We want it, too: when our lives seem too difficult, when violence and injustice are rampant in our world.

Yet, it seldom happens that way. Isaiah begins with a vision of God's powerful intervention but ends with a different image: God as the potter, we as the clay.

It is tempting to hope in a God who swoops in, fixing everything. That's not how God usually operates. That doesn't mean that God is not at work. God is at work within us and among us. We have to stay awake to the signs of hope surrounding us, seeing how we, as clay in God's hand, are God's presence in our world.

Our hope is in a God who, in Jesus, stoops down. It is God's stooping (rather than swooping) that is remarkable: God's willingness to become one of us and lead us in a better way.

**DAILY PRACTICE** This Advent, how will you hope in God who stoops down to support you (rather than swooping in to fix everything)?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *Potter God, mold me as clay to be your presence in our world.*

# Be a Red Door

*“Come, let us go up to the Lord’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.”* ISAIAH 2:3

In various cultures, red doors are a sign of invitation, a welcome place to come and relax, a refuge from bad weather and other problems. The red door suggested that people could come in, eat, and stay for a while. During the Underground Railway days of the Civil War, any red entry symbolized protection for fleeing African American slaves and refugees searching for a safe house. The homeowners offered food and lodging to those who came to their red doors.

Isaiah, in speaking about the pilgrimage of nations to Mount Zion, invites us to the house of the God of Jacob. It surely must have a red door—a place of welcome and acceptance, of learning and inspiration, of comfort as well as challenge—as we walk in the path of our hospitable God.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Be a red door. Whenever you see the color red, think of a way you could be welcoming to the next person you encounter: in person, on the phone, on social media, or someone you hear about in the news.

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *Welcoming God, make the door of my heart wide enough to receive all your people, especially those who are searching for warmth, kindness, and compassion.*

# An Abundant Christmas

*That abundance may flourish in his days, great bounty...*

**PSALM 72:7**

In a recent faith-sharing group, one woman told of going to a rummage sale with her friend. As they perused the many items, Pat was drawn to a beautiful serving platter and said, "I think I'll get this." Her friend replied, "Pat, you donated that."

Do we have so many things that we don't even know what we have? Where is our abundance? Is it in what we own or in our relationship with God, our family, and our friends? In our care for each other, especially the needy?

Advent is a time of the year in which two messages can struggle with one another: buy this one more thing or cherish the abundant simplicity—and gift—of relationships, of giving and caring.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Decide to have a simple, but abundant, Advent/Christmas season. Would it be spending somewhat less than last year? Might it be limiting the amount of time spent shopping during the rest of this month? Would it help to evaluate your Christmas traditions and delete one(s) that may no longer be meaningful? Would it be reaching out to those who are lonely, needy, grieving?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of Abundance, slow me down to recognize all that you have given, all that I have, that I have enough. Help me to share the abundance of love with all those in your family.*

# Multiplying Gifts

*He took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. MATTHEW 15:36*

A friend of mine recently spent several weeks in Ireland. While there, she purchased a small skein of wool in Donegal for a friend she works with who loves to knit. Within ten days, a gift bag containing a beautiful knitted hat appeared on my friend's desk. As my friend told the knitter that the yarn was supposed to be a gift for *her*, this grateful colleague said in reply, "The joy is in the making and the giving."

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes something new from the gift given to him, then gives the gift back to the giver as well as to everyone gathered. God's work of multiplying the good continues in and through us. We can make a difference, bringing about a world that abounds with miracles of compassionate caring, reverent respect, and easing of suffering.

**DAILY PRACTICE** What gift have you received lately (something beautiful or useful, a gift card, food, the gift of someone's time, listening, an act of kindness, etc.)? How might you gift back to the giver or spread the gift to others?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of Endless Giving, show me that joy comes from making and giving; help me to always search for ways to bring surprise, happiness, and enjoyment to others.*

## Saint Ambrose

ISAIAH 26:1-6; MATTHEW 7:21, 24-27

# Guiding Words

*“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them...”* MATTHEW 7:24

A kitchen supervisor gave his three chefs a recipe with clear instructions. The first chef said, “You can show a recipe to 100 people and each person interprets it differently. Recipes are hard to follow, so why even read them?”

The second chef said, “These aren’t the literal directions of our supervisor. I believe the ingredients all have hidden meanings: the meat represents one thing, the spices symbolize something else, and the time and temperature are an allegory.”

While the other two engaged in debate, the third chef simply took the recipe, preparing the dish according to the words of the instructions. The dish turned out to be delicious, while the other two chefs’ creations were disasters.

Words are important; living the words and acting on them determine the trajectory of our lives. God’s words are foundational for us.

**DAILY PRACTICE** A cento is a literary work, often a poem, created exclusively from lines or phrases lifted from the work(s) of another author (or authors). We assemble the excerpts in whatever order we wish, thereby bringing to life a rich new text. Take your favorite Scripture passages, or passages from the Advent readings (such as the Magnificat or Benedictus) and create your own cento.

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of Guiding Words, imprint your word in my heart so it is the rock, the foundation, of all I do.*

### Feast of the Immaculate Conception

GENESIS 3:9-15, 20; EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 11-12; LUKE 1:26-38

# So Much Goodness

*“Hail, favored one!”*

**LUKE 1:28**

Today’s Gospel reminds us that Mary, God’s favored one, was full of grace. This is how God saw—and gifted—Mary from the first moment: as alive with grace.

Today’s feast celebrates what Scripture proclaims: Mary was uniquely blessed with the gift of God’s holy life—grace—from the moment she was conceived in her mother Anne’s womb. The message of today’s feast confidently and eagerly asserts that everything is grace, everything is a gift because of God’s love for us.

We, too, are recipients of God’s grace. Today Paul reminds us, “God...has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing...God chose us...to be holy and without blemish.”

That is how God sees us: even with our faults and failings, God sees us as good, as holy, as filled with grace, the very life of God. We are called to see ourselves as God sees us. Of course, there is an implication in that: that’s how God sees everyone and all creation.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Let this anonymous saying, which reminds us how to live when we see as God sees, be your mantra today: “May I gaze at each person with a look that says ‘I know so much good about you.’”

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *Thank you, Generous God, for creating me in goodness. Help me only—and always—to see the goodness in all your people.*

# Healing Wounds

*...the Lord binds up the wounds of his people  
and heals the bruises... ISAIAH 30:26*

“O Holy Night” was originally a poem commissioned by a French priest in 1847 because he wanted something special to read at Christmas Mass. In 1855, a Boston pastor, John Sullivan Dwight, fell in love with it primarily because of verse 3: “Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is Love and His gospel is Peace; Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, And in his name all oppression shall cease...”

In 1855, America was on the brink of the Civil War. Over the next six years, eleven Southern States would secede, primarily over the issue of slavery. Undoubtedly not the safest time for a hymn like this. Many of today’s most popular versions of “O Holy Night” still don’t include verse 3.

Isaiah tells us that God heals our wounds and bruises. We are called to do the same as all around us, people are hurting and ill-treated, often because of human actions, prejudices, and misconceptions.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Listen to “O Holy Night” (a version that includes verse 3), spending time reflecting on what it means for us as disciples of Jesus. Where is there oppression today that you might heal?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of Freedom, help me to recognize oppression and bring healing, to see wounds and mend them, to be aware of injury and create reconciliation.*