

# Introduction

We've probably all heard about the poll that asked a sample audience: "What is the greatest danger of our age: ignorance or apathy?" One half of the people answered, "I don't know," and the other half responded, "I don't care."

We might laugh when we hear this story; yet is it close to reality? Are people—throughout the world as well as in our churches today—despondent, indifferent, discouraged...and feeling left without hope?

In our Christmas carol "Angels We Have Heard on High," we sing: "Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be which inspire your heavenly song?" In the midst of a culture experiencing strife, oppression, and unrest, the shepherds heard whispers of hope.

Advent is a season to hear the whispers of—and to rekindle the power of—*hope*. A poem by Aino Makoto relates a conversation among four candles: the peace candle goes out because no one is interested in keeping it lit; the faith candle goes out because it no longer feels indispensable; the love candle goes out because people don't understand its importance. A child enters the room, sees the three dark candles, and starts to cry. The fourth candle gently tells the child not to be afraid, for she is the hope candle, and because she is still burning, together they can relight the other candles.

As we celebrate Advent this year—and reflect, with this book, on the daily Scripture readings—let us listen for the myriad whispers of hope that are all around us. Together, let us live Advent and relight the light of hope in our families, our communities, our church, our nation, and our world.

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# Imagine

*“Therefore, stay awake!”* MATTHEW 24:42

My mom watched my niece as she was intently coloring a picture. “Katie,” she said, “snowmen aren’t purple.” Remaining focused on her picture, Katie replied, “They are when you have an imagination.”

Today’s readings—and Advent itself—are a call to watch and to live with a no-boundaries imagination. Staying attentively awake, we watch for God, who transforms our seemingly ordinary moments into overwhelming experiences of seeing Jesus in every person and recognizing God always at work among us.

Just as Advent declares that we are surrounded every day with the possibility of meeting God, so our imaginations are also challenged to realize that God’s dream for our world is in our hands. The places where we experience God—our homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and parishes—are also the places where we are called to bring God’s dream: to listen and understand, to care compassionately, to be aware of the lonely and suffering, to be a voice for the voiceless.

**DAILY PRACTICE** How do you imagine God? Where and when do you experience Jesus during your ordinary days? Without putting limits on your imagination, how are you called to bring God’s dream to your world during these coming days of Advent?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God who dreams for us, help me to see with imaginative eyes the myriad ways you are always with me, the countless opportunities to compassionately be your dream for all I meet.*

## Protecting Shelter

*For over all, his glory will be shelter and protection: shade from the parching heat of day, refuge and cover from storm and rain.* ISAIAH 4:6

During last year's California wildfires, ninety-three-year-old Margaret Newsum, very immobile because of a broken back, watched her town burn. As she feared for her life, Dane Cummings, her garbage truck driver, drove up. Her house was his last stop after checking on fifty others on his route. Letting someone ride in his truck violated company policy and could cost him his job, but that wasn't important, and he gently helped her in. During the five-hour ride to safety, Newsum and Cummings shared details about their lives—things like beating cancer three times and surviving a horrific car accident. Cummings recalls, "It was the best conversation I've had in a truck ever." Margaret Newsum had no family and nowhere to go, so Brian Harrison, Cummings' childhood friend and coworker, took her in.

Isaiah tells us today of God's constant protection and shelter. We have only to look around to notice the many ways God is protecting today through people like Dane Cummings and Brian Harrison.

**DAILY PRACTICE** During this Advent season—of God coming in surprising and constant ways—watch for people's sheltering and protecting actions (rather than bemoaning—and sometimes contributing to—the negativity of the world).

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *Protecting God, place me in situations where I can be a shelter to the needy, the lonely, and the fearful.*

## A God Not Hidden

*Blessed are the eyes that see what you see.*

LUKE 10:23

As a toddler, Tyler, my great-nephew, loved to play hide-and-go-seek—in his childlike way. He would call: “I’m hiding. I’m under the bed.” He liked to get on my back, saying, “Go find me.” After a few seconds as I wandered around the house pretending to wonder where he might be, Tyler would say, “I’m right here. I’m on your back. See...?” and would peek around so I couldn’t miss him.

One of the messages of the Incarnation, God becoming one of us, is that God doesn’t hide from us; God is found always and everywhere in plain sight when we have faith-filled and trusting eyes to see. God is always “hiding,” like Tyler, on our back; God always has our backs.

The Incarnation is about God and about each of us. Our faith is rooted in the reality of God touching us. Who we are as people loved and empowered by God is a promise and a destiny that never leaves us; it always silently speaks to us about our lives.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Throughout the day, each time you are aware of God touching you, God on your back, jot it down. At the end of the day, wonder and give thanks.

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God who never hides, increase in me the awareness of how close you are, of how much you love me.*

## Compassion for the Simplest Need

*“I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way.”*

MATTHEW 15:32

Growing up during a devastating drought, Edna Ogwangi experienced starvation, as do 795 million people throughout the world every day. Earning a social work degree in the United States, she returned to Kenya to provide food for the hungry. She continues today as chief officer at Rise Against Hunger, an organization that distributes food to the world’s most vulnerable.

We expect God’s compassion for our spiritual needs that have eternal consequences, and for our physical needs that have a lifelong impact. A surprise of today’s gospel is that God’s tender compassion extends even to our *daily* food. We might think that God has bigger things to do, yet the infinite heart of God is concerned about everything we need.

Another challenging surprise is that Jesus could have responded by himself, but he involved the disciples. He was saying, *Learn from me. I care not only about your lifetime problems and my eternal promises but your every need.*

**DAILY PRACTICE** As you give thanks for God’s concern for your simplest needs, learn and do something about hunger (e.g., Bread for the World, your local food pantry).

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *Generous God, as Jesus shared loaves and fish, you showed solidarity with the hungry. Give me the hunger to be a part of the feeding and care of our world.*

# God Is Still Speaking

*“Everyone who listens to these words of mine...”*

MATTHEW 7:24

After TV star Gracie Allen died, her husband, George Burns, found an envelope from her addressed to him. The note said, “George, never place a period where God places a comma.”

The United Church of Christ uses the slogan “God is still speaking”; their logo is a comma, reminding people that God still has a lot to say; there is always something new. During this Advent season, we’re challenged to realize that, because of the Incarnation, nothing is ended; there are no periods. God is still speaking.

Has something ever happened that caused you to think, “It’s over—this is the end of my world”? Later you realized it wasn’t the end; it was a pause (a comma); God had something new in mind. No matter what happens—a mistake, discouragement, illness, grief, fear, or worry—God is still speaking.

In many parishes we sing the song “God is still speaking, listen and draw near.” To hear God requires nearness and listening.

**DAILY PRACTICE** On a post-it note, draw a large comma, placing it where you will see it frequently. Each time you see it, ask yourself: What new thing is God telling me, showing me?

**ADVENT PRAYER** *God who is still speaking, draw me close so that I may hear you everywhere. God who offers newness, deepen my faith so that I might discover you in all things.*

## What Do We See?

*Their eyes were opened.*

MATTHEW 9:30

Noticing an overweight Buddha sitting under a tree, an arrogant soldier said, “You look like a pig!” The Buddha replied: “You look like God!” Surprised, the soldier asked: “Why do you say that I look like God?” The Buddha answered: “We don’t see what’s outside us, we see what’s inside and project it outward. I sit here all day thinking about God. When I look out, that’s what I see. You, though, must be thinking about something else!”

In today’s gospel, two blind men are cured. The story, of course, is about more than physical “blindness.” Our eyesight is linked to our thoughts, our attitudes, our feelings, our wounds, and our virtues. Our challenge, then, is to keep watch, to link our thoughts—and our eyesight—to the way God sees.

There are many legends about St. Nicholas, whose feast we celebrate today, stories of his generous giving. Perhaps he was able to give to all because he had a wide vision; he could see the goodness of everyone, as the Buddha did.

**DAILY PRACTICE** Place an old pair of glasses on your dinner table or nightstand to remind you to think about how you see. Do your inner thoughts help you to see the goodness of everyone?

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of Goodness, help my thoughts to be of you, to always think your thoughts, so that I only see goodness.*

## Act

*Jesus sent out these twelve... “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.”* MATTHEW 10:5, 8

A Google search will reveal the many surveys constantly being taken these days. Many are fascinating; some produce much commentary suggesting challenges for the future. Many are religious surveys, often asking: “Do you believe in...?”

Reflecting on today’s gospel can cause us to wonder if “Do you believe in...” is the most appropriate question. Is there a difference between “belief in...” and “action because of...?” Jesus asked for more than belief in his teachings (as important as they are). He sent the twelve out to *act*: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and drive out demons.

Christmas—the Incarnation—happened not only because of God’s belief in us but because of God’s action: sending Jesus to be one with us. Does Advent/Christmas call us to act?

**DAILY PRACTICE** Because of your belief in Jesus, act in a way you’ve never done before; e.g., make a care package to give to the next homeless person you see; stop and wait at every door, holding it open for the person behind you; at the supermarket, stock up on BOGOs and start handing them out to everyone you see: “I just got this for free and I don’t need it—want it?”

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**ADVENT PRAYER** *God of action, show me what to do, how to be your active loving in my world.*