

# ADVENT REFLECTIONS

## The Second Week of Advent

### Sunday December 6

Luke 1:57-68

John, son of Zechariah, better known to us as John the Baptist, is an important character in Advent. He comes saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Luke 3:4), quoting the prophets of old. However, in today's reading we see John's origins.

Elizabeth, miraculously at her age, gives birth to a child, in fulfillment of what the angel of the Lord had told Zechariah when he was burning incense at the altar at the hour of prayer. Zechariah doubted the promise at the time and, for his disbelief, was unable to speak until John's birth. But when the day had come, as Zechariah reminded all that the child's name will be John, just as the angel commanded, "immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God."

Perhaps we ought to think of Advent as a time to go silent, relatively speaking. Can we mute the noise, the ads, the hustle and bustle, or at least tone it down just enough to cultivate belief in the promise of God? Isn't it encouraging that even the one who came to help us prepare the way for Jesus, had *his* way prepared for by God? Isn't it good news that God can sustain his promise even in the face of our unbelief? Ask God to make you attentive to his promise that we might boldly proclaim: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people."

### Monday December 7

Revelation 1:1-8

Since Advent looks to the end, to the coming of Jesus, we are directed toward Revelation, the last book in the Bible. The Revelation points to one thing: the victory of the Lamb and His people. We need to hear the Advent invitation: "Grace to you and peace from . . . Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth."

We look to the coming of "the faithful witness." Jesus the Messiah is the one who has shown us the Father, revealing God to us, and has shown us the perfect response of worship to the Father, revealing our true humanity to us. Only in and through him can we know the Father and know who we are called to be.

Jesus is "the first-born of the dead." It's important to remember that although in preparing for Christmas we are awaiting Jesus' birth from the Blessed Virgin Mary, the word reminds us that it is Jesus' resurrection from the dead that is the new birth in which our salvation finds its foundation. We look to this hope of resurrection.

Finally, we look to Him who is "the ruler of kings on earth." Because he has conquered sin and death, Jesus is King and Ruler of all. He is coming into the world, and we want to get ready. Advent is the time to get ready not merely for a visit from the King but for that day when

the King will take us with him into his Kingdom to rule with him forever, “ma[king] us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.”

### Tuesday December 8

Matthew 22:34-46

As we heard on the First Sunday of Advent, the life of this kingdom that is coming into the world is summed up in Jesus’ own summary of the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is essential to the Gospel and yet in and of itself is not something new—some Rabbis taught this and it is found in the Old Testament. What is new is found in the discussion Jesus has with the Pharisees. Jesus asks them a question: “What do you think of the Christ (Messiah)? Whose son is he?” They answered: “The Son of David.” And they are correct by the standards presented in Jesus’ own genealogy.

Yet, Jesus then quotes a verse from Psalm 110 (which incidentally is one of the most quoted verses in the New Testament): “The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet.” Then he asks a question: “If David thus calls him (the Messiah) Lord, how is he his son?” His listeners are stumped; we don’t have to be. Jesus is asserting that as Messiah he is Lord even over King David. He is Lord over Israel and indeed over the whole earth.

So if we want to know what it is to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we can look nowhere else other than Jesus and his example. Do we let Jesus—his Word, his Church, his Spirit—determine the shape of our obedience, or do we conveniently define those terms ourselves? How can we release control and invite God to lead us into faithfulness and freedom from sin?

### Wednesday December 9

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus continues, in today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel, to claim lordship over the terms of the faithfulness and obedience of God’s people. Specifically, he begins to address the hypocrisy of Israel’s leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. It’s always important to remember that these were the committed, zealous disciples of the day. They sought revival, called the people to obedience, and wanted to see a new commitment to the law of God. Jesus singles them out because he has much in common with them.

But Jesus does call them out, because although they claim the moral high ground, they do not practice what they preach. Instead, they lay heavy moral burdens that they themselves are not prepared to shoulder upon others. What righteousness they do exhibit is for show and they love the honor bestowed upon them.

It’s not that there cannot be those who are called “Teacher” as most Christian traditions have, or “Father” as our catholic tradition addresses priests, but that those ascriptions only bear the weight given to them as they are submitted to, and take their authority from, the “one master, the Christ.” For Jesus showed us once and for all that the way that is greatest is the

way of the servant. How do you struggle with hypocrisy? Where do you fail to practice what you preach? How might God be calling you to lead by example, and especially by being a servant, during this Advent season?

#### Thursday December 10

Matthew 23:13-26

We would be remiss not to sit on this theme of hypocrisy one more day (at least!). Jesus had words with these religious leaders and as those committed to Christ and his Church we ought to heed them.

Reflect upon this image of trying to clean the outside of a cup while leaving it filthy on the inside. Not an attractive image. The world is often confused, if not repelled, by the witness of Christians who are always going about cleaning the outside of their cups (or other people's!) while failing to deal with the sin that is in their hearts.

How might our witness be different if the world saw Christians who were humble, addressing their own sin before claiming authority to speak to that of others? In this Advent season of preparation, take some time to look at your "cup." Ask God to "clean your heart," praying through Psalm 51, or another psalm or prayer of repentance. Let's invite God to make us holy as he is holy, that the world might see our good works and glorify our father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

#### Friday December 11

Haggai 1:1-15

Haggai? It's the third to last book in the Old Testament. After being allowed to return to Judea following their exile in Babylon, the Jews were wrestling with their identity as a people. Their hesitance to rebuild the temple seems to reflect a lack of faith that God would recreate them as a people and bring about the new time that was promised.

The temple was the place where God's glory would dwell, the place where the people learned to worship and trust God. The Lord says to the people: "my house[...] lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house." There is the Advent theme, can you hear it?

In Jesus Christ, who is himself God Incarnate, God with us, we have been brought together as God's new people, living in God's new time, and receiving God's Kingdom. Yet often we are more preoccupied with building up our own little kingdoms, focused on the cares of the world, our families, jobs, our houses, etc. It's not that these are not important but rather that their importance lies precisely in how they all become sites where God's glory is made manifest.

So let us come and work on the house of the Lord of hosts, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as [we] see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25). We, "like living stones," are to be "built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4). For "if any one is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Saturday December 12

Haggai 2:1-9

“My Spirit abides among you; fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor. . . and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.”

We can probably think of many ways that a passage like that might be misused. God does not want the silver and gold of the nations; they are his already. He is not guaranteeing by these words that those who give to God or worship God, for that matter, will never endure hardship, pain, or lean years.

Notice, it is *God* who will shake the very things that he has created so that it will bring forth even more abundance for his glory. There’s a wonderful prayer that says begins: “O God, who didst wonderfully create, and yet more wonderfully renew the dignity of human nature. . .” God is bringing us to that day when what was begun in the work of Creation will be consummated in the New Creation. All that is good and true and beautiful in all the world will take its place in the house of God and we will enter into that prosperity that can only be enjoyed when death has been destroyed and we take our place with Christ in the Kingdom of God. What can we do now to begin to live towards that end?