THE STILLNESS WE SEEK

CATHY H. GEORGE

DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR ADVENT
The Stillness We Seek

*Daily Meditations for Advent*

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FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio
The Stillness We Seek
“Cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” So says the collect for the First Sunday of Advent in The Book of Common Prayer.

Perhaps more than any other time of year, these four weeks preceding Christmas Day and the twelve days after are a time when the church invites us to come in from what goes on outside. Through the prayers, readings, colors, and silence of our worship, we are given the spiritual refreshment and guidance we seek. The colors of Advent are stunning and rich: royal blue, purple, rose, and white. The stillness we seek in the midst of all the activity around us is found in the centering power of the Savior whose birth we await.

Advent is filled with expectation and sometimes disappointment. The days before Christmas are sacred. We want to make time for prayer. We look forward to annual concerts and pageants, as well as seeing and hearing from people we care about. In the midst of our hopes for the season we also encounter traffic jams, ornery people, lists with more to be done than we have time for, and long lines in stores. We miss people we love who have died; we may grieve a
divorce or feel the loneliness of being single. Maybe we are angry over losing a job. Advent is a time of year when we often experience conflict between our hopes for peace and joy and the commercial and social demands made upon us.

The secret to living fully might be simply to be where we are, keenly aware of the present moment. In the next four weeks we will pause to pray and seek the peace that is always there in the midst of whatever else we are doing. We will sing: “Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee” *(The Hymnal 1982, #66).* I pray that those words will come true for you this Advent.

A woman I admire lost her husband in a helicopter crash when their four children were very young. She never missed church on Sunday but rarely spoke of her faith. I wondered whether her faith helped her at the time of this tragic loss, and when I asked her she replied, “Sometimes all you can do is read the psalms.” These meditations are dedicated to her. They are inspired by a line from a psalm appointed for each day in Advent through Epiphany from the Daily Office lectionary in *The Book of Common Prayer.*

Cathy H. George
Dorchester, Massachusetts
First Sunday of Advent

But the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, in those who await his gracious favor.

—Psalm 147:12

Take your time. So often we are in a hurry, rushing between one thing and the next. We usually try to use our time efficiently and effectively. Advent begins with the reminder to wait upon God. So as we begin, we give to God the simple gift of our time.

Remember Fred Rogers in the children’s program Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood? He took his time. He did one thing at a time, and did it fully, whether it was changing from his outdoor jacket and hanging it in the closet to change into his indoor sweater, or sitting down to change from his dress shoes to his sneakers. He took his time and was present to what he was doing. Children were drawn to his calm. Mr. Rogers gave you his full and complete attention.

As you pray, give it your full attention. Take your time. What we seek in prayer is not a state of peace or bliss. We don’t pray in order to “get something out of it.” Our success at prayer will not be anything
particular that happens while we pray; it is simply doing it each day and not giving up. It does not matter if your mind wanders to mundane details. Gently, firmly, repeatedly invite it back.

We do not pray in order to accomplish something; we pray to increase the space in our life for God. Today I pray for the grace to do one thing at a time, and to do it with my complete and full attention.

One of the most important things in our prayer is the eagerness and confidence with which we throw ourselves open to his perpetual coming. There should always be more waiting than striving in a Christian prayer.

—Evelyn Underhill
Christian mysticist
(1875-1941)
First Monday of Advent

Submit to the Lord with fear, and with trembling bow before him.
—Psalm 2:11

When my daughter was a toddler, she awoke from her nap in the early dusk of late December afternoons. She climbed into her stroller and I pushed it over the bumpy neighborhood sidewalk in the fresh, cold air in the last light before supper. As darkness descended, candles were lit, lights came on, and smells of supper cooking were in the air. We passed reindeer on roofs, Santas in sleighs, colored lights marking the edges of homes, and candy canes bordering sidewalks. She pointed and screamed with delight, but it was only when she reached the plastic nativity scene, lit from within, that she began twisting in her stroller and pulling at the straps across her tummy to get out and touch it. Pulling off her blue mittens, she walked to Mary and touched her red plastic lips. She knelt down to see baby Jesus, glued to the manger.
“What does the cow say?” I asked.
“Moo,” she said, “and the sheep say ‘Baaa!’”

I lured her away from the figures by offering her a lollipop from my pocket if she climbed back into the stroller. She leaned to one side to look back until the nativity scene was out of sight.

In Montreal’s old city, a larger-than-life nativity scene is crawling with children. A little boy pushes his foot against Mary's head scarf as he climbs onto the back of a cow. Two girls hold the hands of the magi, making their threesome a group of five. Other children hold the ears of the donkey like reins on a horse.

God comes to us in a story we know, with animals, a mom, a dad, a baby, and a place to “lay down his sweet head.” The sparkling eyes of children at play display the power of the story of God incarnate. Divine love comes down and stoops to our humanity. God is never the same again, and we are never the same again. In the middle of holiday shopping, in the center of the city, we meet the story of God taking on human form. We behold the glory that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5). We touch the majesty of God with the smallest of fingers and everything in us is well, anointed by Jesus’ coming to be with us.
Second Tuesday of Advent

For with you is the well of life,  
and in your light we see light.  

—Psalm 36:9

For people in the desert climate of Israel, a well was the source of water, and hence of life. Water was salvation. Wells saved lives. The well was the centerpiece of the village, the public gathering place.

A striking white alabaster statue depicting the story of Jesus and the woman he meets at the well sits in a window in the convent chapel of the Sisters of Saint Ann. Morning light beams into the space between these figures as their bodies lean toward each other in lively conversation, their hands extended, their bare feet nearly touching.

“This man knows everything I have ever done,” the woman says, “and he doesn’t condemn me. He knows about my five marriages. He knows I lost the man who truly loved me and was treated shamefully by the man I was then forced to marry. He sees me, not as unclean or impure, but from the inside out. He is not of my tribe or race and he is talking to me, a
woman. I offered him water from the well, and he offered me water welling up to eternal life.”

This living water quenches our thirst to be known and understood, from the inside out. Jesus comes to us and sits with us in the middle of the city, at a well at midday. He knows our stories and extends his hand to us, takes delight in us, and offers us water from the well of life that will never run dry. The woman sat on a stone at the side of the well that hot afternoon and in Jesus’ light, she saw light. God’s coming to us reawakens us to who we are.

Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.

—Thomas Merton, OCso
Trappist monk, theologian, poet
(1915-1968)
Third Wednesday of Advent

Do not be envious when some become rich,
or when the grandeur of their house increases;
For they will carry nothing away at their death,
nor will their grandeur follow them.
Though they thought highly of themselves
while they lived,
and were praised for their success,
They shall join the company of their forebears,
who will never see the light again.

—Psalm 49:16-19

I don’t consider myself rich. You may not consider yourself rich. We are the people this psalm is speaking to. There will always be someone with a nicer car, a bigger barn, better vacations, and a larger house. That is one of the tricks our possessions play on us. We get what we want and then we want more. We are not satisfied. The psalm reminds us that riches give us position and influence, a feeling of success, but not contentment. Ask someone who has more than you whether she feels she has enough. Ask whether her money has brought a sense of purpose to her life.
My husband is not a churchgoer; he struggles with the liturgy. But he is a person who knows contentment. He does not want to increase the size of his business so that he can earn more money; he would rather have more time than more money. He has enough and is content to grow his business slowly and carefully.

The season of Advent allows us to practice contentment. Someone you know will probably get a Christmas gift that you wish you had been given. When it happens, that person can become someone you envy. Or you could be reminded to thank God for what you have and find contentment, not in the gift you didn’t receive or in one you received but didn’t like, but within yourself.

We will carry nothing away at our death.

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*When we have a spirit of thanksgiving we can hold all things lightly.*

*We receive; we do not grab. And when it is time to let go, we do so freely. We are not owners, only stewards.*

—Richard Foster
Theologian and writer
Tears are a gift. What if God had made us without them? We are meant neither to hold them back nor to make too much of them. They are simply the apparatus God has given us to express feelings that run deeper than words: tears of joy, tears of sorrow, tears of pain. Some of us cry easily and frequently, while others can hardly remember the last time they cried. Tears are evoked by sights we see, by beauty, by the emotions of others, by music, by pain, loss, and tragedy.

People cry in church. Looking out at a congregation, I often see people in tears.

Leila is a strong woman who never misses a Sunday except when she goes home to Trinidad. The holiday season is tough on her. She wants it to be over before it begins, and what gets her through is coming to church. She gets the holiday blues—“Why am I so sad when everyone else is so happy?” The sting of loss,
missing those we love and see no longer, or the pain of a family divided or a heart broken is heightened in the weeks before Christmas. Advent offers the consolation of God’s love and understanding to the blues of this season, inviting individuals into community, into the family of God which welcomes us and offers balm to what hurts.

God feeds us with the “bread of tears” and “bowls of tears to drink” as certainly as with a crusty loaf of warm bread on our dinner table and a bowl of soup when we are hungry. Don’t force upon your tears the tyranny of understanding. Let them be. Let them come. They are making sense of your life in ways your mind cannot. Let them release the joy of a wedding, the pain of a divorce, the sadness of grief, the loss of a loved one. Tears are a gift from God.

History is lubricated by tears. Prayer, maybe most prayer (two thirds of the psalms are laments), is accompanied by tears. All these tears are gathered up and absorbed in the tears of Jesus.

—Eugene H. Peterson
Presbyterian pastor and author
December 26

Saint Stephen, Deacon and Martyr

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe,
for you are my crag and my stronghold;
for the sake of your Name, lead me and guide me.

—Psalm 31:3

The twelve days of Christmas, this brief festive season in our church year, is often lost in the aftermath of Christmas celebrations and plans for New Year’s. School vacation week can change everyone’s regular routine. Family members stay on to visit, filling the household. Our days are often filled with activities, making it difficult to keep to our pattern of daily prayer. Changes in our routine are not times to stop praying; they are times to pray in new ways.

Rather than stepping away from prayer when we are out of our routines, these times can enrich our practice, giving us an opportunity to follow the command in scripture to “pray without ceasing.”

Instead of coming away from a meal to pray, let your taste buds praise God in the food you enjoy. Imagine your body without taste buds. How dismal!
Eating would then solely satisfy hunger pangs, which is not how God designed our bodies. Eating is pleasurable. Taste buds are God’s gift; they declare the glory, the magnificence of God’s creation. Praise God for the meal you share and those you share it with. Let tasting food be a prayer.

Instead of getting time away in quiet and closing your eyes to pray, open your eyes and pray in the midst of a walk. When your eyes behold the quiet, snow-laden pine trees or shimmering city Christmas lights, pray in thanksgiving. When we feast our eyes on people we love but do not see at other times of the year, our sight can become an opportunity for prayer.

The birth of Jesus, the child in whom divine life shines, opens every particle of our being, down to the smallest detail of our life, to God’s presence. Don’t waste time feeling badly that you cannot find quiet time away for prayer this week. Let go of the discipline of prayer you have grown accustomed to, just this week, and, as Psalm 34:8 says, be led and guided to pray with your taste and sight. Far from diverting us from prayer, vacation weeks, travel, and unexpected events invite us to come closer to the ultimate goal: to pray without ceasing.
January 6

The Epiphany

Be joyful in the Lord, all you lands;
serve the Lord with gladness
and come before his presence with a song.

—Psalm 100:1

Epiphany is the name of a tuition-free Episcopal middle school for low-income students in my neighborhood. The school’s headmaster is the most joyful person I have ever met. Each morning he wears his bow tie, dress shirt, and blazer and stands at the door at 7:00 a.m. when his students walk across the threshold for breakfast. Three meals are served to the students, and they complete their homework after dinner before going home. The motto of the school is “We never give up on a child.” The teachers are demanding, uncompromising with discipline, and loving. The school exudes joy and the desire for excellence.

On Sunday mornings, when the headmaster could be resting in bed and taking time for himself, he gets up and comes to church to serve at our altar. He brings
food to share at brunch even if he cannot stay to eat with us. He brings joy with him; he serves the Lord with gladness.

Parents of his students have threatened him. He has had his laptop stolen and money taken from his wallet. His teachers have been in crisis and his building projects took impossible turns. His life, like yours and mine, is not happy all the time. But he seems to have made a decision to be joyful—not to fake it, but to be it. It is as if he has set his feet in the stream of gladness, not the muddy pond of the troubling hassles that fill each day. He grows angry, disappointed, and discouraged, and people get mad at him. But the words of this psalm, “Be joyful,” ring in his heart and twinkle in his eye.

Knowing this Christian headmaster has been an epiphany for me. God has made something clear to me through this man. I may wait forever to “feel” joyful because there is so much to feel sad or anxious or angry about. Choosing to be joyful, making gladness the atmosphere that surrounds us—the way we live in the world—can have a profound and lasting effect on the people around us. Be joyful!
About the author

Cathy H. George serves as associate dean and director of formation for Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University. She draws inspiration from the teachings of Jesus and the natural world where she enjoys walking, swimming, gardening, and snowshoeing. She and her husband have two adult children.
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We are delighted to be doing this work and invite your prayers and support.
Many of the biblical psalms urge worshipers to rest in the Lord, wait for the Lord, and put their trust in the Lord. In this volume, Episcopal priest Cathy H. George explores the dimensions of resting, waiting, and trusting that arise in the Advent and Christmas seasons. Each meditation is based on one of the psalms appointed for the day in the Daily Office Lectionary in The Book of Common Prayer.

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