

Holy Is His Name

DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR ADVENT

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FORWARD MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in Chinese churches where the common dialect was not my mother tongue of Cantonese. I have vivid memories of attending services as a child and singing along to the hymns, even though I did not know the words. Mostly, I was mouthing along in my best attempt to mimic by sound alone, half a beat too slow.

After graduating college, I interned with the Episcopal nuns of the Community of St. Mary, Southern Province for nine months. The nuns keep the Daily Office, the official set prayers of the church. As part of the rhythms of the community, I joined the sisters every day in praying Morning Prayer, Holy Eucharist, and Evening Prayer in their chapel. I became intimately familiar with the four gospel canticles. These songs of praise are found in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Saint Luke, within the story of Jesus's birth.

The *Magnificat* or Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) is sung or recited at every Evening Prayer. The *Benedictus* or Song of Zechariah (1:68-79) is sung at Morning Prayer. The *Gloria in excelsis* begins with the words of Saint Luke (2:14) and is sung at celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. Finally, the

Nunc dimittis or Song of Simeon (2:29-32) is sung at Evening Prayer and Compline.

Canticle by canticle, song by song, we will journey through the nativity story this Advent. In the first week, we begin with the angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary—the angel's announcement to Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. Next, we revisit Gabriel's visit to Zechariah and the naming of his son, John. Then, we see the angels who appeared to shepherds. Finally, Jesus is presented at the temple in Jerusalem. Two more devotionals follow for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Advent is the time set apart for us to anticipate and prepare for Jesus's birth. The season begins exactly four Sundays before each Christmas. This book contains devotionals for each day of the season, but because the duration of Advent can vary in length, you may not need every devotional in the fourth week of a particular year. In the shortest year, the Fourth Sunday of Advent becomes Christmas Eve by sunset; in the longest year, Christmas Day is the next Sunday.

These canticles are near and dear to my heart. My nuns sing only a few specific Gregorian plainchant settings of these songs. I have chosen the contemporary translations found in the Episcopal Church's 1979 Book of Common Prayer,

because it is these words that I know. Just as I mouthed the words to songs as a small child, singing has imprinted these phrasings upon my lips and heart. These are the specific parts of the Daily Office that I cannot pray alone without hearing the voices of the Sisters of St. Mary singing along. I know these prayers now more by song than spoken.

Over the past few years, I have often wondered at how one carries on singing in the face of persistent violence. In June 2019, one million residents of my hometown Hong Kong moved to protest against the extradition bill proposed by the region's government. On June 12, the police response to the general strike and siege was the most violent yet in the earliest stage of the movement. In the nights leading up to the siege, I remember watching footage of protesters having their bags randomly searched by riot police.

Gathered Christians began to sing a contemporary Christian worship hymn, “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord,” in prayer and protest. At the time, I could not understand how people could sing words of praise—without ceasing and in the literal face of state retaliation. Thousands of miles and continents away from my birthplace, I felt helpless and deeply grieved all through the protests. In time, I learned that I could not bear but to sing “praise be to God,” over and over again. To sing *alleluia* to God alone is in direct defiance of all the empires,

rulers, and systems of exploitation that vie constantly for our worship, our devotion, and our souls.

These are the songs that I know how to keep singing.

I pray that the words in this book may bring you some of the hope and peace and liberation promised to us all in the season of Advent.

Thank you for praying these words with me.

—Elis

The First Week of Advent



Magnificat

The Song of Mary



*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.*

*He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.*

*He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

—LUKE 1:46-55

SAMPLE

Sunday

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*



We can find ourselves in many places of the Annunciation story—the moment when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. Like Mary, we may be in the blush of a relationship, romantic or otherwise. We may be facing down an impossible decision in our lives. We might feel confused, hesitant, or scared. We may feel God’s presence and be calm—or terrified. We might take a deep breath and say, “Yes.”

Scripture tells us that we meet angels in the strangers of our lives. When I begin to pay attention, I can meet God’s messengers anywhere. Perhaps I encounter these messengers

in a wise word from my sister, during a chat with my priest, over lunch with a friend, or during a therapy session. There is no place too mundane—or too holy, for that matter—for God to show up: not my home, my school, my work, or even my church. God still moves and whispers, whether in burning bushes, through the pages of holy scripture, on my weekly walks, or in perfect, absolute silence.

God's message can be big, and it can be small. During Advent, we remember the biggest message, which the archangel Gabriel carried to Mary: she is favored by God. God is with her. She will bear the Son of God. He will be a king forever.

In the face of this great message, it is no wonder that Mary feels small. She is a young woman from Nazareth. She is betrothed to a man named Joseph. She lives with her family. With this annunciation, Mary's future becomes uncertain.

The angel is waiting.

Gabriel promises that nothing is impossible with God. She learns that her relative Elizabeth now also knows the miracle of pregnancy. I imagine Mary's leap of faith filling the space and silence of her room. We may seldom hear God's messages in our lives as clearly as Mary did that day. But with all to consider and everything at stake in her life, Mary's answer comes clear and decisive. She answers, "Here

am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Here I am.

God’s greatest desire is to be reconciled to us. At the Annunciation, Mary responds to all that God is with all of who she is. She agrees to carry, bear, and raise God Incarnate. The *Magnificat* comes after all of this, when Mary runs to Elizabeth. When she arrives at the house, Elizabeth greets her with love and joy, and Mary’s song pours out of her in response. Our church year begins with Mary’s delight in God.

Monday

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.*



Every October, my church holds a Blessing of the Animals service to celebrate the feast day of Saint Francis. Parishioners and neighbors bring their pets for a blessing from our priests. Throughout the year, we have a liturgy for blessing a home, another for blessing the Christmas crèche, and all manner of seasonal variations on formal blessings. I've also learned to not be shy about asking my clergy to bless a new rosary or a saint key chain I'm gifting to one of my students.

So what does it mean to be blessed? Elizabeth greets Mary with the words, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." To this day, many Christians revere

Mary by calling her the Blessed Virgin Mary. The epithet is an outward sign that something is different about Mary. And Elizabeth is saying that there is something different about Jesus too.

As Christians, we take our name after the Greek title for Jesus: *Christos*. The word means anointed and is a translation of the Hebrew Messiah. We find our identity in following the one who is anointed and set apart. In baptism, we become marked as Christ's own forever.

In Advent, we set aside an entire season to prepare for Jesus's birth. Whatever communal or personal practices we've begun, we pronounce this time as holy. It's special. Something is different about this time of year. Whether we revel in holiday spirit—or we've grown numb to it—Advent teaches us something else about time: God is coming again.

Tuesday

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.*



A friend of mine, a Benedictine nun, introduced me to the practice of praying the collects of each Sunday in the liturgical year. In Christian liturgy, the collect is a prayer that's said in the beginning of a eucharist. It is said to gather up or collect all the prayers of the congregation present. In the Book of Common Prayer, we have appointed collects for every Sunday and various feast days, many of which Thomas Cranmer translated from the traditional Latin more than 500 years ago.

Sister Elizabeth, csm, believed that praying a collect every day for a whole week—and not just once on Sunday—shaped you. After all, how many of us learned the Lord's

Prayer or Nicene Creed by sheer repetition and familiarity over time? She credited Herb O'Driscoll's book, *Prayers for the Breaking of Bread*, for this practice in her life. She described reading along with the meditations for the week before a given Sunday, how she read and sat with and prayed with the lectionary readings. This practice better prepared her for hearing them in church and receiving the subsequent sermon.

I found myself deeply compelled by this. I went about implementing the practice (albeit somewhat modified) into my own prayer life. In the time I spent with the nuns, I prayed Morning and Evening Prayer with them and worshiped with them at a daily eucharist. The collect of the day is repeated at each of these services, some 21 times over the course of a week.

During my last visit to the convent, our liturgical cycle found me praying daily for God to “increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal” (Proper 12, Book of Common Prayer, p. 231). I was quickly invited into meditating upon God's mercy. If asked to describe God to someone, I might say, “God is merciful.” But I'm not sure that mercy would be the first word I would use. What even is mercy?

In a way, we use the word mercy to encompass many other attributes or actions. God is compassionate. God knows our suffering and pain. God comforts us. God forgives our sins, no matter how mundane or scandalous. God loves us. In Jesus, we know God as our Redeemer, our Comforter, and our Good Shepherd. When we ask God to show us mercy, to increase and multiply mercy upon us, we join our prayers with all who have cried out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy on me.” We join Mary in her song, confident in God’s loving mercy for us.

Wednesday

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*



A fourth-century monk gave us a list of “eight patterns of evil,” which would later be revised as the seven deadly sins. Some might say we can trace these “patterns of evil” back even further to Greek and Roman concepts of virtues and vices. Regardless, our human desire to understand how we inevitably mess up, hurt others, or miss the mark is nothing new. The ancient consensus was that hubris or pridefulness is the original sin, the source of all the other straying. Whenever we think we are better or even worse than everyone or everything else, we’ve misunderstood something about the way things really are—about who we really are.

One of my favorite stories is from Rebbe Simcha Bunim, a great Hasidic Jewish leader in Poland. He taught that we should always carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One piece of paper would read, “The world was created for my sake.” The other piece of paper would read, “I am but ashes and dust.” We should take out each slip as we need it, reading the reminders to balance pride and humility.

I have found this approach to be most helpful in understanding the creation stories. The narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 are slightly different. In one, humanity is created by God, spoken into existence like the rest of creation, described as bearing the image of God, and charged with caring for all the creatures of the earth. This world was “created for our sake.”

In the second story, it is a singular man whom God creates out of the dust of the ground, into whom God breathes life. Then comes the garden and the creatures, which Adam is charged with naming. It is later that Eve is formed from the side of Adam, as it is not good for humanity to be alone.

You may remember how that story goes. In their pride, Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, reaching for that which God only knows. In their pride, they suddenly know shame as well. God, in response to their disobedience, sends them out of the Garden of Eden.

Paradise is broken. The relationship between God and humanity, the relationship between humans and the rest of creation, has been broken. God describes us as “ashes and dust,” and we will all return to the dust of the ground. The creation stories begin with our grandness, our mark as God’s own image, and they end with our pride and our fall.

Today, Mary takes us all the way back to these moments of creation. Through Mary, God turns everything upside down. Jesus as God Incarnate enters into that very dust. I love to use the word “condescension” in this context—but not as smugness or snobbery. The incarnation is the literal descent of God into human form out of abiding love for us. By becoming one of us, God in Jesus shows us true strength and humility. Saint Paul describes it like this: Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,” but in his human form, “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Becoming like us, God scatters our pride. There is something precious in God’s image that we each bear. The question is what we will do with God. This Advent, the Christ Child reveals to us anew how to live into that image and how to treat others with dignity. Thank God it will not look or be the way we might expect.