

PRAY AND REFLECT: ADVENT



WEEK FOUR
LOVE



*Bring your lamp to those without light,
enkindle the flame of love in those without hope.*

Rabindranath Tagore



*It is only with the eyes of love that we'll see His coming.
... Love is our awareness of God's coming in someone else.*

Ralph Morton Growing Hope

INTRODUCTION

In the first book of Kings God speaks to the prophet Elijah but His voice is not to be found in the power of the hurricane, in the roar of the earthquake or in the heat of the fire. Instead, God reveals Himself in the gentle whisper of the breeze. It is here, in the quiet, that God speaks to Elijah in a small, still voice. Elijah meets God in the silence and this is where we too can encounter Him in moments of quiet contemplation.

Anne O'Connor

pause for silent prayer and reflection

MARY INSPIRES US TO BELIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE

When we talk about Mary and the Magnificat, the words we tend to use are words like *surrender*, *obedience*, and *yielded-ness*. These are good words, and indeed they capture much of Mary's posture in this powerful and venerated prayer. But we have to be careful of ascribing too much passivity to Mary's role in the Advent story and in the life of Jesus. Mary did not simply submit to God. Mary *dreamed* with God, aligned her hopes, plans, and actions with God. Mary *birthed* God.

Perhaps more than any other New Testament character, Mary paid attention to the prophets. From the prophets she knew that God favours the marginalized over the powerful, the weak over the strong, the poor over the rich. She knew that God scatters the proud and lifts up the humble, that God never gives up, always surprises, and always shows up.

From the prophets, Mary knew that God could very well use someone like her— an unmarried teenage girl, a minority in an occupied territory at a turbulent time in history — to bring the Messiah into the world in the most unceremonious way: through water and womb, blood and labour pains. And so, she said *yes*. She believed.

The Magnificat is not simply an act of surrender. It is a creative act, a prophecy and declaration in which Mary adds her own voice, her own dreams and her own plans for this baby to the dreams and plans of God. Mary is an example to all of us of how God not only challenges us to believe the impossible but also to participate in God's creative work in the world and in our redemption.

Rachel Held Evans

pause for silent prayer and reflection

PRAYER *(we say together)*

God of reconciliation and grace,
you promise us a world where all is new,
where love is born when hope is gone,
where broken relationships are restored to wholeness.
May we live as people who know your story of love,
and have the vision to imagine what could be possible
if we dared to live this story.

God of abundant life,
may we be witnesses of love, hope and peace,
and co-creators of your life in the world.
Amen.

Christian Aid

PRAYER FOR OUR PARISH *(we say together)*

Dear Father, pour out your Holy Spirit on our parish
that we may grow ever closer to you,
showing your loving kindness to others.

May our parish be a place of welcome for all,
offering companionship to the lonely,
shelter to the stranger
and comfort to the broken.
We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour.
Amen.

Anne O'Connor

CLOSING PRAYER *(we say together)*

O God of love, we ask you to give us love;
love in our thinking, love in our speaking,
love in our doing,
and love in the hidden places of our souls;
Love of those with whom we find it hard to bear;
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;
Love of those with whom we work,
and love of those with whom we take our ease;
that so at length we may be worthy to dwell with you,
who are eternal love.
Amen.

Archbishop William Temple

CHRISTMAS PRESENT

In recent weeks I've been reflecting on how Jesus' coming into the world teaches us about presence, and how Jesus is the presence of the Father, God-with-us.

One of the Hebrew words translated as '*presence*' in the Old Testament is '*paniyim*', which can also be translated as '*face*'. I love this, because it reveals something of the nearness of God's presence and the close, personal encounter we can have with God face-to-face. As Psalm 67:1 tells us, to experience God's presence is to experience the light in God's shining face.

'*Present*' is one of those wonderfully rich words that can have all sorts of meanings. When we think of Christmas presents, we think of gifts; Jesus certainly is the self-gift of the Father to the world.

But to be present also means to be here, to be near, to turn up, to exist in this moment, now, to be accessible. Isn't it wonderful that Jesus' coming means all these things as well?

When I look at Jesus' life and ministry, I'm struck by how totally present he was to everyone and in everything. Whether in prayer to the Father, in conversation with the people he encountered, in proclaiming the kingdom, in ministering to people's needs, in listening to their concerns, in suffering, in dying and in rising, Jesus was fully present in each particular moment.

I wonder if this Christmas we can practise being fully present in this particular moment, to these particular people in this particular place, without thinking of what comes next?

Can we accept this moment as a gift from God, to be lived to the full?

Annie O'Connor for Church Army,
Advent 2018

pause for silent prayer and reflection

MUSIC: Walk Ludovico Einaudi



GOD OUR HOPE AND OUR DESIRE

God our hope and our desire,
we wait for your coming as a woman longs for the birth,
the exile for her home, the lover for the touch of his beloved,
and the humble poor for justice.

Janet Morley from *Bread of Tomorrow*

THE WOMB OF SILENCE

Not in the whirlwind, not in the lightning,
not in the strife of tongues is God to be found,
but in the still small voice
speaking in the womb of silence.
Therefore be silent.

Let the past be silent.
Let there be no vain regrets,
no brooding on past failures, no bitterness,
no judgement of oneself or of others.
Let all be silent.

Be still and know.
Be still and look.
Let the eyes of the mind be closed
that you may hear
what otherwise you would not hear,
that you may know
what otherwise you would not know.

Abandon yourself to God in longing love,
simply, holding on to nothing but God.
So you may enter the silence of eternity
and know the union of yourself with God.

And if in the silence God does not answer,
God is still there.
God's silence is the silence of love.
Wait then in patience and in submission.
It is good to wait in silence for God's coming.

Author unknown

pause for silent prayer and reflection

LET YOUR GOD LOVE YOU

Be silent.
Be still.

Alone,
Empty
Before your God.

Say nothing.
Ask nothing.

Be silent.
Be still.

Let your God
Look upon you.

That is all.

Edwina Gateley

from *There Was No Path So I Trod One*

pause for silent prayer and reflection

MUSIC: *Stay With Me*

Stay with me, remain here with me.
Watch and pray, watch and pray.

Jacques Berthier, Taizé

A READING FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth.

Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

pause for silent prayer and reflection

God knows
And understands.

God loves you
With an enormous love,
Wanting only to
Look upon you
With love.

Quiet.
Still.
Be.

Let your God
Love you.

SANCTUARY

The archangel Gabriel has extended his astounding invitation. Mary has given her astonishing *yes*. Now she is alone – suddenly, entirely, dangerously alone – save for the unlikely child she now carries. She flees: toward her kinswoman, toward refuge, toward sanctuary. In the home of Elizabeth, in the company of her cousin who is herself pregnant in most unusual circumstances, Mary finds what she most needs. Elizabeth gathers and enfolds her. Welcomes her. Blesses her.

In response to Elizabeth's blessing, Mary sings. She sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderfully, Mary sings of a God who not only *will* do these things, but who *has* done these things. She sings as if God has already accomplished the redemption and restoration of the world.

The blessing that Elizabeth speaks and enacts through her words, her welcome, her gift of sanctuary: such a blessing has the power to help us, like Mary, speak the word we most need to offer.

Such a blessing gives us a glimpse of the redemption that God, in God's strange sense of time, has somehow already accomplished. Such a blessing stirs up in us the strength to participate with God in bringing about this redemption in *this* time, in *this* world.

Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace*

www.janrichardson.com

MUSIC: *Kindle the Flame* The Northumbria Community

PRAYER (we say together)

Lord, as we prepare for your coming at Bethlehem
we watch with patience.

As the Word became flesh and lived and moved among us,
so we search for you,
that in finding you we may respond with hearts and minds
to that Love, born of Mary;
to the Word made flesh, dwelling in us,
so that we may dwell in Him.

Timothy Radcliffe OP from *The Little Book of Advent*