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THE LITURGICAL YEAR

While the four-week Advent season occurs at the close of a calendar year, it marks the beginning of the Liturgical Church calendar. The Liturgical Year was developed during the first centuries of the early church as a means of marking time redemptively. We as a Church look forward, in part, by looking backward - remembering that God has acted, does act, and will continue to act in our lives. Advent begins our new year as we wait for, then celebrate the first coming of Christ, and anticipate His second coming.

ADVENT

The word Advent, derived from the Latin *adventus*, means, literally, “coming” or “arrival.” During this season, we as a church celebrate the first coming of Jesus and anticipate his second coming. However, Advent is not merely, or even primarily, a time of celebration - it is the time leading into celebration. Fleming Rutledge writes, “Advent begins in the darkness.” This statement remains true for us today. Though Advent culminates in our celebration of Jesus’ birth over 2000 years ago in a manger, it reflects far more.

As the culture around us rushes into Christmas with incessant ads, bright lights, and cheery songs, the Church slows down to sit in the darkness, to watch, to wait. Advent is a time, as Paul states in Romans 8, to “wait with eager longing,” “groaning” for new creation, Christ’s second coming. How do we do this? How do we come to a place of eager longing and groaning? The answer, of course, is found sitting in the darkness of this world. Confronting, with truth and honesty, a world filled with war, racism, political unrest, and countless injustices.

Looking into the darkness does not consist only of looking externally. It may, in fact, be most important that we look inwardly, at our own darkness, our own sin, at the selfishness and anger, pride and greed, lust and envy in our own hearts. It is in this darkness that Jesus comes not bearing light, but being light.

Staring into this darkness, sitting with it, makes the celebration of God’s incarnational presence far greater. As Tish Harrison Warren writes: “We need collective space, as a society, to grieve — to look long and hard at what is cracked and fractured in our world and our lives. Only then can celebration become deep, rich and resonant, not as a saccharine act of delusion but as a defiant act of hope.”

CHRISTMASTIDE

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus’ past arrival and continue to hope for His second coming. We celebrate the fulfillment of our Advent expectations and welcome light into the darkness. Within the Liturgical Calendar, Christmas is a twelve-day celebration of Jesus’ presence in our world. It is a time of celebration and rejoicing, a joyous, extended feast.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Beginning in the 16th Century, the Christian practice of this season is marked by themes for reflection each week: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love. This guide centers on one of these themes each week, providing a reflection as well as weekly liturgical prayers and daily scripture readings.

Remember: the goal of this guide is not to “accomplish” anything specific, but to draw near to God, to reflect on and dwell within the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace, and to wait well for Christ’s second coming.

A four-movement rhythm is suggested to engage the Scriptures and commune with God. The guide begins on the first Sunday of Advent, November 28, and ends with the 12th day of Christmastide, Wednesday, January 5th. If you miss a day, we encourage you to pick up with the next day’s reading and liturgy.

A.W. Tozer writes, “For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself.” We hope that this guide might lead you to God himself.

The four movements suggested for engaging Scripture in this guide are:

SURRENDER, LISTEN, MEDITATE, RESPOND.

The movements suggested in this guide are just that - a suggestion. Feel free to go about your normal rhythms or to utilize a different rhythm. These rhythms are tools to help you commune with God, and they are described below.

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Take a moment to sit still and quiet yourself - your heart and your mind. Breathe deeply and recognize that you are in the Presence of God. There is nothing you need to do to be in God’s Presence. He is near because He loves you. Use anything that may be helpful to you to feel and enter God’s presence - this could be silence or quiet music, deep breathing, or a simple prayer word. The goal is to shut out distractions and be present and open to God and His Word.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

Read through the Scripture 1-2 times. Remember the goal is to experience and cultivate intimacy with God. Read slowly, and ask yourself questions about the text. Some example questions are provided below - we often find it helpful to write down thoughts surrounding these questions as they arrive.

- What does the Scripture tell me about God?
- What does the Scripture tell me about mankind?
- What does the Scripture tell me about God’s heart for the people and world around me?
- What does the Scripture tell me about God’s heart for me?

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE (CONT)

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Quieting yourself and maintaining an open presence to God, revisit the passage once more. If you wrote down anything in response to the Scripture, reflect on that. If any specific words or phrases in the passage stood out, sit with and dwell on them.

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections - whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is simply to respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT REFLECTION | SHALOM | PEACE

If you stand on a certain cliff on the coast of Ireland, right outside the town of Dingle, all you can see is the Atlantic Ocean stretching out indefinitely. It's a deep blue and its motion is constant but underwhelming from this vantage point, like looking down to watch a crowd of people walk from the 40th floor of a skyscraper. I looked at that water for a long time and felt immense calm—calm from the sound of the water, the majesty of the landscape, the warmth of the sun on my face and the promise of an Irish coffee back in town.

This cliff is the most westerly part of Europe— you can only see the Atlantic Ocean because that's all there is for hundreds of miles. No islands, no shallows, no port cities— this leaves the ocean completely uninhibited and its waves uninterrupted. Hoards of seals swam close and barked at us from the sand. There's no place for waves to crash except on each other and on the shoreline which makes the water treacherous. The day after I looked out into the ocean, feeling very poetic about nature, I got the chance to be out on a boat in those same waters. The captain assured us that there was no danger, but the boat moved up and down in the waves like the lines on a heart monitor. The waves weren't underwhelming now— they could take me down swiftly, easily, laughing at my dreamy perception of their wildness. How could the waterscape that had brought me such comfort and hope the day before be the same scene that now caused immense panic and fear? I'd created a picture of peace on the cliff; once I stepped into the frame, I got the texture, the brushstrokes, the variation, the chaos.

Sometimes, I equate peace and quiet. Because it's a common refrain to hear the words "peace" and "quiet" paired together, right? A mother asks for it from her screaming children. A politician asks for it from sparring colleagues. I ask for it from neighbors who decide 7am on a Saturday is the best time to finally nail that shelving system into their wall.

Quiet can certainly be an aspect of peace. But equating the two, I believe, is limiting what peace requires in the lives of those who seek it. My imagination often reaches only so far as to see Peace as conflict-avoidance, everyone agreeing, a sort of Band-Aid harmony. And I think we can grab moments of peace through that lens. But Peace, real Peace requires moving through conflict and fear and unpredictableness and memory and assumptions. It requires both stepping back and moving in.

Crashing waves and never-ending blue create awe.

The largeness of the thing makes you feel small, in the best way, and practically insists that you stop to take it all in.

But you can't achieve lasting peace standing on the cliff. There's no entering peace without entering into conflict first.

In this Advent season, we celebrate the entrance of Peace into conflict – into an unsanitary animal pen, into rumors that caused immediate hatred, into perceived scandal of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, into taking everything everyone knew and turning it on its head. Jesus entered into moments of quiet and prayer, but also deep conflict and fear. All the while, he was building the frame that asks us to, even insists that we do both of these, that Peace is possible and promised, that Christ is with us both on the cliff and in the waves.

An Advent Reflection by Holly Patton

WEEK 1 OF ADVENT: SHALOM | PEACE

OPENING PRAYER FOR WEEK 1

O God of peace, who taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved,
In quietness and in confidence shall be our strength:
By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray, to your peace-filled presence,
Where we may be still and know that You are our God. Amen

Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer, Prayer 59

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Pause to be still, quiet yourself, and breathe slowly. Become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

God is near to you because He loves you.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

As you read, remember the goal is not primarily information, but intimacy with God. Read the passage slowly, asking yourself first what the scripture says about God. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart for the people and world around you. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart towards you.

"For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." - A.W. Tozer

READINGS FOR WEEK 1

- Sunday: Colossians 1:19-23
- Monday: Isaiah 9:1-7
- Tuesday: Isaiah 11:1-10
- Wednesday: Psalm 24
- Thursday: Matthew 11:25-30
- Friday: Ephesians 2:11-22
- Saturday: Philippians 4:1-7

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Becoming aware of God's presence again, revisit the passage once more. Reflect on what the passage reveals about God and God's heart. Sit with and dwell on any words or phrases that jump out.

WEEK 1 OF ADVENT: SHALOM | PEACE

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections, whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is to simply respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR WEEK 1

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Collect from the Book of Common Prayer

AGAPTE

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT REFLECTION | AGAPE | LOVE

"I am the light of the world."

Light. Gentle and illuminating, intense and ablaze. It is the essence of life itself. The energy that sustains us, unveiling the world around us. As we draw nearer to its source, truth is further revealed. Our existence is defined by what is seen in its presence.

God is love, and as Jesus remains one with God, God's love remains one with him. Perfect love in human form, a light in every sense of the word. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men ". The Messiah entered this dying world, a light cast over our dark existence. For the first time, we could see. For the first time, the darkness no longer defined us.

"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."

Darkness. A devoid abyss, indistinguishable nothingness. Darkness does not exist by itself as a unique physical entity, but is simply the absence of light. In our spiritual lives, darkness is marked by the absence of eternal life. A life in utter darkness is unimaginable to us in the physical sense, and yet many souls pass by never knowing the presence of the light.

Try as we might, on our own, we cannot know a life without sin, without death, without darkness. The price of sin is death, separation from the one we were created to love, to walk with, our eternal Shepherd. But here is the One who offers the impossible, death to the darkness.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Light in the darkness. The absence of light cannot exist when there is presence of light. With his birth, the Light has broken the darkness. Rays emerge from the horizon, promising a new day, a new beginning.

The greatest act of love took light untouched by darkness as the price for life. The light of the world, in all His brilliance, declared the power of darkness obsolete. All for the sake of God's abiding love, a love yearning for nothing more than for us to live in his presence.

A love that never ends.

A love embodying the nature of our God, unconditional and infinite, transcending all knowledge and understanding, eternally perfect and true. A love that never leaves or forsakes, for "neither height nor depth, not anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

A love that dwells within us, in Spirit.

A love deeply personal and intimate, designed specifically for each of us. A love that sees you, knows you, understands you, completes you, as only your Maker can. A love, healing and transforming us, not in the way of the world, which alters, but in the way of the Creator, which brings us to our truest self, brings us closer to the heart of God.

A love that moves through us, in this world. A love that overcomes the darkness.

A love reaching every hidden place, bringing the deep darkness to light. A love comforting in the valley of the shadow of death, expelling all fear. Though we have left the darkness, the world continues to dwell in the night. As we walk in the light, His love pervades every motive, every action, our lives now defined by His son. As we walk in the light, we look to the end of the night, the day to come. As we walk, we remember the source of our light. Emmanuel, God is with us.

An Advent reflection from Christine Thomas

WEEK 2 OF ADVENT: AGAPE | LOVE

OPENING PRAYER FOR WEEK 2

Lord, surely we wait and we wait for you
You who bent down and heard our cries
You who drew us up from the pit, out of the deep mud
And set our feet upon a rock, making our steps secure
As we wait, Lord, put a new song in our mouths,
A song of praise to our God

- Prayer adapted from Psalm 40

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Pause to be still, quiet yourself, and breathe slowly. Become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

God is near to you because He loves you.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

As you read, remember the goal is not primarily information, but intimacy with God. Read the passage slowly, asking yourself first what the scripture says about God. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart for the people and world around you. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart towards you.

"For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." - A.W. Tozer

READINGS FOR WEEK 1

- Sunday: Romans 5:6-11
- Monday: Ezekiel 36:16-29
- Tuesday: Psalm 36:1-12
- Wednesday: John 1:1-17
- Thursday: Romans 8:1-17
- Friday: Romans 8:18-39
- Saturday: 1 John 4:7-21

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Becoming aware of God's presence again, revisit the passage once more. Reflect on what the passage reveals about God and God's heart. Sit with and dwell on any words or phrases that jump out.

WEEK 2 OF ADVENT: AGAPE | LOVE

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections, whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is to simply respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR WEEK 2

Ever present God, you taught us that the night is far spent and the day is at hand.
Grant that we may be found watching for the coming of your Son.
Save us from undue love of the world,
That we may wait with patient hope for the day of the Lord,
And so abide in him, that when he shall appear,
We may not be ashamed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- A prayer from the Church of Scotland

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT REFLECTION | YAKHAL | HOPE

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:20

When early Christianity spoke of the return of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment. Even though this thought may appear to us to be so unlike Christmas, it is original Christianity and to be taken extremely seriously. When we hear Jesus knocking, our conscience first of all pricks us: Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God's dwelling place? Thus Advent becomes a time of self-examination. "Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!" (Valentin Thilo), as the old song sings. It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previously peoples trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth. That is why we find it so strange when we see the marks of God in the world so often together with the marks of human suffering, with the marks of the cross on Golgotha. We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love. God makes us happy as only children can be happy. God wants to always be with us, wherever we may be – in our sin, in our suffering and death. We are no longer alone; God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved unto us. Therefore we adults can rejoice deeply within our hearts under the Christmas tree, perhaps much more than the children are able. We know that God's goodness will once again draw near. We think of all of God's goodness that came our way last year and sense something of this marvelous home. Jesus comes in judgment and grace: "Behold I stand at the door... Open wide the gates!" (Ps. 24:7).

One day, at the last judgment, he will separate the sheep and the goats and will say to those on his right: "Come, you blessed...I was hungry and you fed me..." (Matt. 25:34). To the astonished question of when and where, he answered: "What you did to the least of these, you have done to me..." (Matt. 25:40). With that we are faced with the shocking reality: Jesus stands at the door and knocks, in complete reality. He asks you for help in the form of a beggar, in the form of a ruined human being in torn clothing. He confronts you in every person that you meet. Christ walks on the earth as your neighbor as long as there are people. He walks on the earth as the one through whom God calls you, speaks to you and makes his demands. That is the greatest seriousness and the greatest blessedness of the Advent message. Christ stands at the door. He lives in the form of the person in our midst. Will you keep the door locked or open it to him?

Christ is still knocking. It is not yet Christmas. But it is also not the great final Advent, the final coming of Christ. Through all the Advents of our life that we celebrate goes the longing for the final Advent, where it says: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). Advent is a time of waiting. Our whole life, however, is Advent – that is, a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters and one rejoices in the words of the angels: "On earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests." Learn to wait, because he has promised to come. "I stand at the door..." We however call to him: "Yes, come soon, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

WEEK 3 OF ADVENT: YAKHAL | HOPE

OPENING PRAYER FOR WEEK 3

In our secret yearnings we wait for your coming
and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will.

Give us the grace and the impatience
to wait for your coming to the bottom of our toes,
to the edges of our fingertips.
We do not want our several worlds to end.
Come in your power and come in our weakness
in any case
and make all things new.

- *Advent Prayer by Walter Brueggeman*

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Pause to be still, quiet yourself, and breathe slowly. Become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

God is near to you because He loves you.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

As you read, remember the goal is not primarily information, but intimacy with God. Read the passage slowly, asking yourself first what the scripture says about God. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart for the people and world around you. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart towards you.

"For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." - A.W. Tozer

READINGS FOR WEEK 3

- Sunday: 1 Peter 1:3-9
- Monday: Isaiah 2:1-5
- Tuesday: Isaiah 60:15-22
- Wednesday: Jeremiah 33:14-16
- Thursday: Mark 11
- Friday: Mark 13:32-37
- Saturday: Isaiah 40:1-5

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Becoming aware of God's presence again, revisit the passage once more. Reflect on what the passage reveals about God and God's heart. Sit with and dwell on any words or phrases that jump out.

WEEK 3 OF ADVENT: YAKHAL | HOPE

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections, whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is to simply respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR WEEK 3

How long, O LORD? Will you continue to forget me?
How long will you hide from me?
How long will I have sorrow in my heart?
Consider me, answer me, O LORD.
But I trust in your steadfast love,
My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD.

- Prayer adapted from Psalm 13

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT REFLECTION | CHARA | JOY

Real love came much later. It lay at the end of a long and arduous road, and up to the very last moment I had been convinced it wouldn't happen. I was so surprised by its arrival, so unprepared, that on the day it arrived I had already arranged for us to visit the Holocaust museum at Auschwitz. You were holding my feet on the train to the bus that would take us there. We were heading toward all that makes life intolerable, feeling the only thing that makes it worthwhile. That was joy. But it's no good thinking about or discussing it. It has no place next to the furious argument about who cleaned the house or picked up the child. It is irrelevant when sitting peacefully, watching an old movie, or doing an impression of two old ladies in a shop, or as I eat a popsicle while you scowl at me, or when working on different floors of the library. It doesn't fit with the everyday. The thing no one ever tells you about joy is that it has very little real pleasure in it. And yet if it hadn't happened at all, at least once, how would we live?

Zadie Smith, Joy

Station, by Maria Hummel

Days you are sick, we get dressed slow,
find our hats, and ride the train.
We pass a junkyard and the bay,
then a dark tunnel, then a dark tunnel.

You lose your hat. I find it. The train
sighs open at Burlingame,
past dark tons of scrap and water.
I carry you down the black steps.

Burlingame is the size of joy:
a race past bakeries, gold rings
in open black cases. I don't care
who sees my crooked smile

or what erases it, past the bakery,
when you tire. We ride the blades again
beside the crooked bay. You smile.
I hold you like a hole holds light.

We wear our hats and ride the knives.
They cannot fix you. They try and try.
Tunnel! Into the dark open we go.
Days you are sick, we get dressed slow.

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT: CHARA | JOY

OPENING PRAYER FOR WEEK 4

God of timeless grace, you fill us with joyful expectation.
Make us ready for the message that prepares the way,
that with uprightness of heart and holy joy
we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son,
Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Pause to be still, quiet yourself, and breathe slowly. Become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

God is near to you because He loves you.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

As you read, remember the goal is not primarily information, but intimacy with God. Read the passage slowly, asking yourself first what the scripture says about God. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart for the people and world around you. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart towards you.

"For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." - A.W. Tozer

READINGS FOR WEEK 4

- Sunday: John 16:16-22
- Monday: Isaiah 7:10-17
- Tuesday: Psalm 126:1-6
- Wednesday: John 1:1-18
- Thursday: James 1:2-16
- Christmas Eve: Matthew 1:1-25

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Becoming aware of God's presence again, revisit the passage once more. Reflect on what the passage reveals about God and God's heart. Sit with and dwell on any words or phrases that jump out.

WEEK 4 OF ADVENT: CHARA | JOY

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections, whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is to simply respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR WEEK 4

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation,
That your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming,
may find in us a mansion prepared for himself;
who lives and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

- Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Book of Common Prayer

CHRISTMASTIDE

CHRISTMASTIDE REFLECTION

The lovely old carols played and replayed till their effect is like a dentist's drill or a jackhammer, the bathetic banalities of the pulpit and the chilling commercialism of almost everything else, people spending money they can't afford on presents you neither need nor want, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the plastic tree, the cornball creche, the Hallmark Virgin. Yet for all our efforts, we've never quite managed to ruin it. That in itself is part of the miracle, a part you can see. Most of the miracle you can't see, or don't.

The young clergyman and his wife do all the things you do on Christmas Eve. They string the lights and hang the ornaments. They supervise the hanging of the stockings. They tuck in the children. They lug the presents down out of hiding and pile them under the tree. Just as they're about to fall exhausted into bed, the husband remembers his neighbor's sheep. The man asked him to feed them for him while he was away, and in the press of other matters that night he forgot all about them. So down the hill he goes through knee-deep snow. He gets two bales of hay from the barn and carries them out to the shed. There's a forty-watt bulb hanging by its cord from the low roof, and he turns it on. The sheep huddle in a corner watching as he snaps the baling twine, shakes the squares of hay apart, and starts scattering it. Then they come stumbling and shoving to get at it with their foolish, mild faces, the puffs of their breath showing in the air. He is reaching to turn off the bulb and leave when suddenly he realizes where he is. The winter darkness. The glimmer of light. The smell of the hay and the sound of the animals eating. Where he is, of course, is the manger.

He only just saw it. He whose business it is above everything else to have an eye for such things is all but blind in that eye. He who on his best days believes that everything that is most precious anywhere comes from that manger might easily have gone home to bed never knowing that he had himself just been in the manger. The world is the manger. It is only by grace that he happens to see this other part of the miracle.

Christmas itself is by grace. It could never have survived our own blindness and depredations otherwise. It could never have happened otherwise. Perhaps it is the very wildness and strangeness of the grace that has led us to try to tame it. We have tried to make it habitable. We have roofed it in and furnished it. We have reduced it to an occasion we feel at home with, at best a touching and beautiful occasion, at worst a trite and cloying one. But if the Christmas event in itself is indeed as a matter of cold, hard fact all it's cracked up to be, then even at best our efforts are misleading.

The Word become flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space/time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God . . . who for us and for our salvation," as the Nicene Creed puts it, "came down from heaven."

Came down. Only then do we dare uncover our eyes and see what we can see. It is the Resurrection and the Life she holds in her arms. It is the bitterness of death he takes at her breast.

Christmas by Friedrich Buechner, originally published in Whistling in the Dark

Now burn, new born to the world,
Double-natured name,
The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled
Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,
Mid-numbered He in three of the thunder-throne!
Not a dooms-day dazzle in his coming nor dark as he came
Kind, but royally reclaiming his own;
A released shower, let flash to the shire, not a lightning of fire hard-hurled.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

CHRISTMASTIDE

OPENING PRAYER FOR CHRISTMASTIDE

God of love, all year long we pursue power and money, yet you come in weakness. All season long we covet great material gifts when you alone offer what is lasting. Through the work of this Lord Jesus, who comes among us full of grace and truth, forgive us, heal us, correct us. Then open our lips, that we may sing your praise with the angels, and remake our lives, that we may witness to your transforming love. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SURRENDER to the Presence of God

Pause to be still, quiet yourself, and breathe slowly. Become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

God is near to you because He loves you.

LISTEN to the Scriptures

As you read, remember the goal is not primarily information, but intimacy with God. Read the passage slowly, asking yourself first what the scripture says about God. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart for the people and world around you. Ask what the scripture says about God's heart towards you.

"For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself." - A.W. Tozer

READINGS FOR THE WEEK OF CHRISTMASTIDE

- Christmas Day: Luke 2:1-21
- Sunday after Christmas: Psalm 3
- Monday after Christmas: Psalm 13
- Tuesday after Christmas: Psalm 14
- Wednesday after Christmas: Psalm 18
- Thursday after Christmas: Psalm 27
- Friday after Christmas: Psalm 42
- Saturday after Christmas: Psalm 62
- 2nd Sunday after Christmas: Psalm 95
- 2nd Monday after Christmas: Psalm 121
- 2nd Tuesday after Christmas: Psalm 138
- 2nd Wednesday after Christmas: Matthew 3:1-12

MEDITATE on the Scriptures

Becoming aware of God's presence again, revisit the passage once more. Reflect on what the passage reveals about God and God's heart. Sit with and dwell on any words or phrases that jump out.

CHRISTMASTIDE

RESPOND in Prayer

Talk to God about your reflections, whether it's awe or frustration, gratefulness or anger, be honest with God. The goal is to simply respond to anything God, through His Word, has revealed to you.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR THE WEEK OF CHRISTMASTIDE

Lord of Love, Hope, Joy and Peace
We celebrate your first arrival in the manger
and long for Your second coming.
Reorder our loves, O Lord.
We open ourselves to You -
help us in opening ourselves to You.
Lord, may Your desires become ours,
fill us with Your gifts of Love, Hope, Joy and Peace
that we may overflow into others. Amen