

Advent 2015

A Season of Service

Reflecting on the four pillars of faith-based service:
Spirituality, Social Justice,
Simple Living and Community



A resource brought to you by:



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A Season of Service

Dear Friends,

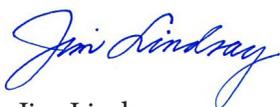
It is with joy that we offer you this Advent Reflection Guide 2015. Whether you are a prospective, current or former volunteer, a staff member of a volunteer program, or simply a friend and supporter of the Catholic Apostolate Center and/or Catholic Volunteer Network, I pray that this guide has something to offer you as you journey through this Advent season – a time of expectation in which we look for Christ to come into our lives in new and refreshing ways.

In this Advent Guide, we have assembled prayers, reflections, and service suggestions from several current and former volunteers corresponding to each Sunday's Gospel. Each week, we focus on one of the four pillars of faith-based service: Community, Social Justice, Simple Living, and Spirituality. During a season filled with consumerism, extravagance, and indulgence, these four tenets may seem out of place to many – but we believe that service is at the heart of the Advent season. We are called to make room for Christ in our lives, and that means also making room for those who are in need.

Over the years, I've heard many stories from volunteers who experience Christmas in a completely new way during their year of service. For many this is the first time that the holidays are focused on creating and celebrating community, rather than exchanging gifts. Many experience a unique kind of fellowship with each other and with those they serve during this season. In places like Africa, Central America, Southeast Asia, and in all corners of the United States, they prepare for and celebrate the birth of Christ with a community of people of vastly different backgrounds. Their simple lifestyle and journeys of faith allow them to experience the gift of Christ's Incarnation in a new way. I was deeply inspired by the reflections our volunteers contributed to this guide, and I hope you will be too. I encourage you to take time over the next few weeks to embrace the spirit of Advent by renewing your commitment to service.

It is my hope that each of us who journeys through this season, with the support of this Advent Reflection Guide, will also enter into Christ's coming in a deeper way into our lives. Wherever we are called to serve, may they be places where Christ's presence is deeply felt!

Peace,



Jim Lindsay
Executive Director
Catholic Volunteer Network

First Sunday of Advent

“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Reflection by Anna Hester, current NPH USA volunteer and former Jesuit Volunteer Corps volunteer

Remember the good memories, learn from the bad ones, and laugh at the mistakes. My year as a JV was full of countless surprises. Living with just three other girls in a tiny apartment caused me to constantly ask the question - what have I gotten myself into? I was in no way prepared for the difficult challenges that my community would experience nor did I anticipate that those same challenges would make us stronger, that it would solidify our friendship. My community, these former strangers, had suddenly become my friends. We grew together as JVs, still laughing today at our various silly memories. They helped me to focus on the good on the days that I was struggling. They loved me when I needed it the most. We were all outsiders, moving to a new city, a tiny apartment, and four very different jobs that we were all very nervous to begin.

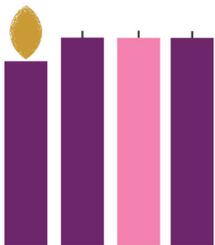
As I look upon today's reading I am reminded of hope, of the goodness of Christ's return. The challenge is to focus upon that hope and to not let daily distractions get in the way of it. As a volunteer I felt that I was more susceptible to those distractions and without my community I would have fallen into that trap. During this Advent season, let's set aside the frenzy that comes along with holidays and take time to focus on the loved ones around you.

FOCUS ON: COMMUNITY

Today's reading relates to community in terms of accountability. While we are waiting together for the second coming of Christ, we need to utilize each other so that we are not distracted from missing out on this miraculous event. Take a moment out of your day to acknowledge how you are feeling - is your heart heavy? When was the last time you took a moment to reflect with your community? Chances are if you are struggling, they might be too.

Prayer:

Dear God, I pray for strength, patience, and balance for myself and those around me. Help me to not get lost in the trails and be my legs when they are weary. Open my eyes and my heart to the goodness around me. Help me remain steadfast and guide me back when I waver. Lord, thank you for being my light during the times when all I see is darkness. Thank you for loving me. Amen.



A Season of Service:

Challenge yourself to join a new community, do something new. Volunteer for a local food bank, raise donations for newly arrived refugees, tutor at a local community center. Whatever service you choose, sit and be present with whomever you are serving. Just listen and serve. Step out of your comfort zone. Sometimes those new experiences are the most rewarding.

Second Sunday of Advent

“The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke 3:1-6

Reflection by Paul Stage, Director of Campus Ministry at Saint Xavier University, and Former Christian Appalachian Project (CAP) Volunteer

“Why did they make that poor, unfortunate priest stumble his way through so many silly names in today’s reading? What does it matter whether Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene or playing Tetris with his sister Abbey? Let’s get to the good part of the story!”

Sometimes I find myself throwing accusations like the one above at the biblical writers. Accusations saying that the story would get along fine without telling us what the year was, or who was in charge, or where the particular location was, because it’s the happy ending and moral that I’m looking for.

But it is in those exact moments of accusation that I most need to be reminded when and where these things happened, because we aren’t reading just another story today. We’re reading about John the Baptist, a particular man in a particular time, who laughed and ate and didn’t shower quite as often as his parents might have liked, just like me.

Because, like John the Baptist, I am a particular person in a particular time. And, like when “the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert” (3:2), the word of God comes to me regularly in small movements within my life to ask for great things. If “the winding roads shall be made straight” (3:5), I had better get started; there is a lot of crookedness in the world around me!

Focus on: SOCIAL JUSTICE

John went to the desert to lead a simple life. He didn’t want to change the world at first; he was, after all, a religious hermit for most of his young adulthood. I find myself in John’s shoes a lot; not so much his diet of bugs and honey, but his desire to leave behind the troubles of the world. Sounds great, doesn’t it? To give up distractions? To focus solely on God? What better way is there than to retreat! How wonderful would it be, except that the fruit of retreats is so often the Word of God calling us to action? Not a big, booming command, but a simple daily whisper: “proclaim; prepare; repent; forgive.” Just like John the Baptist heard his call in the desert, we must likewise follow God’s message when we are called, even if we are in the midst of our own desert.

A Season of Service:



We prepare for the holidays in many ways: by decorating with festive greens and reds; buying gifts for family; getting plane tickets home. Advent is a time of spiritual preparation for the coming of Christ as well - both a remembrance of his birth to a virgin, and a hopeful longing for his second coming in full glory and splendor. Have you spent as much time in spiritual preparation as you have in holiday preparation? Make the time this week and hear God’s particular calling to you: proclaim; prepare; repent; forgive.

Prayer:

*Lord, I am ordinary.
Today is ordinary. This
place is ordinary. It is on
this ordinary day that you
called me to do some-
thing extraordinary- to
announce your coming
and to make straight your
path. Give me the words
to share your presence in
our midst. Give me the
strength to make your
way straight.
St. Paul says that “it is
God who works in you to
will and to act in order to
fulfill His good purpose”
(Philippians 2:13). Give
me the ears to hear your
calling: “Proclaim. Pre-
pare. Repent. Forgive.”*

Third Sunday of Advent

“The crowds asked John the Baptist, ‘What should we do?’ He said to them in reply, ‘Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise.’”

Luke 3:10-18

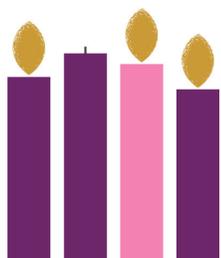
Reflection by Michael O’Neill, former Jesuit Volunteer Corps volunteer

“What then should we do?” After my time in Jesuit Volunteer Corps, this question has been seared onto my heart. As many FJVs might say, I have been “ruined for life” (the unofficial slogan of JVC). Being ruined is being aware of the injustices in the world both far and near (sometimes far too near). Knowing of these injustices I constantly find myself challenged with so many questions, “How should I be living my life?” “How do we conquer injustice and build up the Kingdom of God?” “How does my vocation play into this?” “How do I dialogue with others about these injustices?” “Am I doing enough?” “What does ‘enough’ look like?” All these questions always lead back to the question the crowds asked John the Baptist, “What then should we do?”

While I have no answers that bring a piece of mind I do find some solace in today’s Gospel. While the answers aren’t clear, the direction is. And sometimes that is what is needed and nothing more. Jesus simply said, “Follow me” not “Follow me with these specific details so you know exactly what the way will look like.” The direction I see John pointing us in is adorning a woven fabric of living a life that focuses on community, faith, social justice, and simplicity. These values are so tightly interwoven that one cannot help fully live one without the others. What John calls the crowds to do is live simply so that they may focus on one another as a community and work together for justice and ultimately, remove all distractions between themselves and an all-loving, merciful, and very mysterious God. So, “What then should we do?” I’d say let us pick up this cross together and head in the direction John is pointing. Reminding ourselves that we are merely workers building the Kingdom and to have faith in the God that leads us.

Focus on: SIMPLE LIVING

In today’s Gospel, we hear about John the Baptist responding to the question, “What then should we do?” John the Baptist’s response in short is two-fold. First, go forth doing what is just and honest. He calls the crowds to give away any excess to those who lack and being present to others rather than taking advantage of them. Being John the Baptist, this is a challenge to embrace simplicity. Simplicity helps when living a just and honest life but that is only the half of John’s message. The second part is preparation. Simplicity prepares our hearts to be open to God by re-aligning our focus on what is important in life by removing what distracts us and in the process lifting up others in authentic love.



A Season of Service:

Engage in simplicity! Unbound yourself from things that distract you from others and God. Do you tend to fill up your time? Untangle your schedule to pray and spend time with God. Then go out and serve (perhaps in a food pantry, or in your local parish, temple, mosque, etc). If you find yourself attached to some material possessions, try to practice distancing yourself from them by giving them away. Donate things you find yourself most attached to either to those you know are in need or to a thrift shop, parish clothing drive, etc.

Prayer:

*Mysterious God, you call us to be your humble workers. To simplify our lives and remove those things that distract us from our brothers and sisters; that distract us from You. Help us amidst the struggles of bringing about your Kingdom, to trust in you. To trust in the love you have for us and console us with some direction when we ask “What then should we do?”
Amen.*

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”
Luke 1:39-45

Reflection by Elisa Raubach, current Maggie’s Place Volunteer

At the Annunciation, Mary agreed to do the will of God. Her Fiat brought about our salvation when the God of the universe was knit together in her womb. Soon after Mary begins to ponder this mystery in her heart, she goes in haste to her cousin Elizabeth. The two women did not expect or plan to be pregnant at this time—one after many long years of barrenness and the other at a mere fourteen years old and without a husband. Mary is young, poor, and afraid, yet she goes to her cousin to console, be consoled, serve, and celebrate. She is met with the embrace of Elizabeth who sees Mary’s pregnancy as a source of joy and exultation. Before Mary even explains what has happened, Elizabeth knows in her heart and in her womb Who is present. The mother of her Lord has come, He is hidden as an unborn child.

So often Christ is hidden in our lives: in the poor, the elderly, the sick, the immigrant, the imprisoned, the unborn child. Just as Mary and Elizabeth embraced in order to encounter the hidden Christ, we too must embrace and serve others to encounter Jesus. He is hidden beneath disguises of poverty, fear, and loneliness. At Maggie’s Place, we strive each day to recognize the hidden Christ in the pregnant women and babies we serve—it’s not always easy to do, but there is much joy, hope, and love. Like Elizabeth, we seek to welcome moms who have given their own Fiat to life and love.

FOCUS ON: SPIRITUALITY

“In the mystery of the Annunciation and Visitation, Mary is the very model of the life we should lead. First of all, she welcomed Jesus in her existence; then she shared what she had received. Every time we receive Holy Communion, Jesus the Word becomes flesh in our life... Thus, the first Eucharist was such: Mary’s offering of her Son in her, in whom he had set up the first altar. Mary, the only one who could affirm with absolute confidence, “this is my body,” from the first moment offered her own body, her strength, all her being to form the Body of Christ”—Mother Teresa



A Season of Service:

It can be so easy to go about our day without ever pausing to recognize Christ hidden in the people around us. Where can you embrace Christ in the hidden and the ordinary? Maybe God is calling you to reach out and serve your roommate, your grandmother, or a total stranger at the grocery store. Offer words of consolation or an act of kindness to someone who may be in need. Today, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and be attentive to His promptings—be ready to welcome the hidden Christ with joy.

Prayer:

Come, Lord Jesus. Thank you for coming to us so vulnerable and needy, as an infant in the womb and arms of Mary. Grant us the grace needed to prepare more room in our hearts for You. May we seek after You hidden in others as we prepare for Christmas. Help us to see You in the poor, know You in the lonely, and love You in the fearful. May our hearts always be open to encountering You in the unexpected. Amen.

For Further Reflection...

The readings over these past four weeks of Advent have been filled with a sense of joyful hope and anticipation, as well as a repeated call to action. Many of us tend to forget the buzz felt before the coming of the Messiah, how truly radical and life-changing this event was, not only for the Israelite people, but for the entire world. We live in a world that has already been granted redemption, reconciliation with God. The Messiah has already come! And yet, he comes anew each time we live according to the Gospel message—each time we choose to love and to serve one another.

As we continue to prepare our hearts and minds to receive the Lord this Christmas, I invite you to re-read some of the Sunday readings from these Advent weeks. Try meditating on the Scripture passages by practicing [Lectio Divina](#)—an interactive form of prayer in which you place yourself within the context of the Scripture narrative.

As mentioned, the Advent readings are a repeated call to action. The Gospel from Luke in the first week of Advent says, “stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand...Be vigilant at all times and pray” (Lk 21:28 and Lk 21:36). While these words apply to Christians at all times, they resound ever louder during Advent when we prepare for the coming of Christ through the Incarnation. Our redemption is at hand. By encountering God through [prayer](#), you will be able to be vigilant—finding Christ in all situations and people around you.

The second week of readings are permeated with hope. John the Baptist is announcing the splendor of glory God invites us to. God comes to the world in mercy and love in a form we can understand: as a human being, as one of us. Make straight his paths, first, by examining your own life to see what can be made whole or purified in you. Then, go outward to proclaim the Good News of repentance and salvation through your witness of love.

The third week of Advent readings offers practical, straightforward advice: “If you have two coats, give one” (cf Lk 3:11). This simple phrase from John the

Baptist encompasses [Catholic Social Teaching](#), which reflects God’s special love for the poor and calls us to be God’s people of love and justice. As we see in this reading, people desire to help. “What should we do?” they ask eagerly (Lk 3:10). It is this same question we ask ourselves today, for human beings were created to love. Ask yourself this season, “What should I do? What more can I do for my brothers and sisters, for God?”

The readings in the fourth week of Advent are God’s answer to what we should do. Mary is the perfect example of discipleship. In prayer, she encounters the message and Word of God. God reveals his will for her, and she responds “fiat! Thy will be done!” with joy and

hope (Lk 1:38). She is so receptive to the Word of God that it is made manifest within her! She literally carries the Word of God. As soon as she does so, she goes out in haste to attend to her cousin Elizabeth. She sees a need around her, and goes out in service. Not only does Mary go to serve her kinswoman, she brings Christ to her. She proclaims the salvific Word of God,

which is received with joy. Note that her service starts in the [family](#). Yours can, too.

Reflecting upon the richness of these Scripture passages is only the beginning of our Advent journey. The Christian life impels us ever outward, as Mary’s example shows us. Our prayer and interior life cannot be confined to Scripture, our hearts, or our homes; it must go outward in love and service to the world around us. “Going forth” is one of [Pope Francis’](#) favorite themes. As Pope Francis said, “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (Evangeli Gaudium, 20). Let us find Christ in our brothers and sisters! In so doing, we will empty ourselves of all that is not of Christ—becoming beautiful and simple mangers ready to receive him this Christmas.

- Kate Flannery
Social Media Coordinator
Catholic Apostolate Center

About Us:



Catholic Apostolate Center

Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles

The Catholic Apostolate Center, a ministry of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate (Pallottines) - Immaculate Conception Province, was founded in 2011 to respond to the needs of the Church through: Developing, in collaboration with dioceses and other institutions and organizations, formation programs for the New Evangelization; Assisting Catholic leaders in deepening collaboration with one another; Providing formation and apostolic opportunities for members and collaborators of the Union of Catholic Apostolate. The Center takes its inspiration from the spirituality of St. Vincent Pallotti and achieves its goals through hosting conferences, seminars, webinars, and presentations as well as providing online and print resources.

For more information visit: www.catholicapostolatecenter.org



Catholic Volunteer Network is a national membership organization of Christian volunteer and mission programs that fosters and promotes full-time national and international service opportunities for people of all backgrounds, ages and skills. Catholic Volunteer Network supports and enhances the work of its membership by providing training and resources, networking opportunities, and national advocacy. Each year more than 20,000 volunteers serve in our Network, reaching nearly all states in the U.S. and more than 100 countries.

For more information visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org