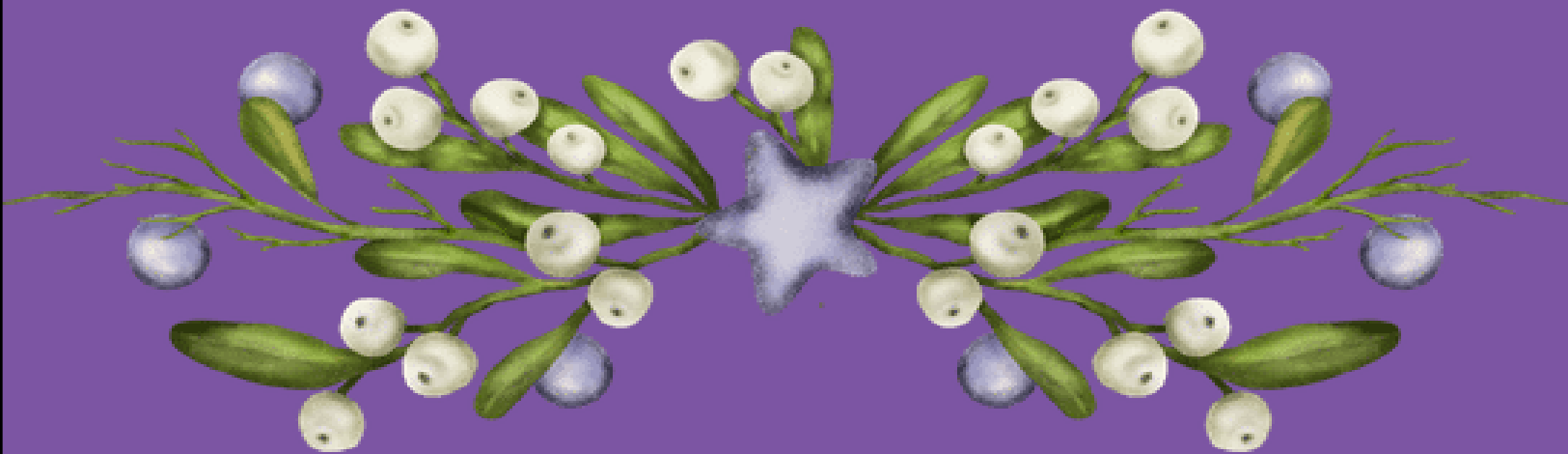


Advent

2021



Volunteer Reflections on the Advent Gospels

Catholic  Volunteer Network



Catholic Apostolate Center

Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles



WELCOME!

Advent 2021 Reflection Guide

We welcome you to join us on this Advent journey of reflection, service, and prayer. It is hard to believe that we are once again in the season of Advent. It is also hard to believe that we are again experiencing Advent and Christmas with the backdrop of a global pandemic. It is in times like these that the acts of prayer and reflection are so vital. It is so easy to get caught up in everything we “need” to do before Christmas that we often forget about the importance of taking time to prepare ourselves for the special time that is about to happen.

Advent is a prayerful time of hopeful waiting. We hope to be able to gather with extended family again to celebrate Christmas. We wait in anticipation for the coming of Christ at Christmas and for his return at the end of time. We hope for peace in our world and in our communities. This time of Advent gives us the opportunity to take a step back and to prepare our hearts and minds for Christmas. What a gift!

We hope that this Advent Reflection Guide will aid you in your time of reflection and prayer this Advent. The reflections on the following pages were written by those who have spent time in service. They reflect on the Gospel readings for each week of Advent and Christmas Day and offer prayers and service suggestions.

Please know that our prayers are with you during Advent and into the Christmas season.

Catholic Volunteer Network & Catholic Apostolate Center



Advent Sunday Week 1 - Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

By Catherine Migel, LCSW, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest, Catholic Charities

2021 has been an anxious year for many, including for me. We have continued to protect ourselves and our communities against COVID-19 but are worried that it has not been eradicated. Loved ones have faced illness and difficulty healing. Friends have sought new jobs after pandemic layoffs, worried about new responsibilities and lingering debts. As a social worker, I have held the concerns of clients closely, hoping to accompany them through their fears. I have offered therapeutic techniques to manage stress and reduce anxiety. But we still worry, I still worry. How do I stay steady through these kinds of storms? How do we wait for the rainbow?

This story reminds me how rooted anxiety and anticipation really are, both in humanity and in the Advent season. In a way, I find this calming, knowing that I am not alone in the very human feelings of worry. There is power in the way Luke names those feelings head on and doesn't shy away from the reality of a world in panic, a world not unlike the one we live in each day. Yet he tells us to find strength and stand upright amid such struggle, as the Son of God will soon enter our world, a Redeemer unafraid of disrupting our chaos and bringing us peace.

How are we to do this? After all, being vigilant when we are afraid is hard, and not succumbing to the stresses of life is even harder. I'm still figuring it out, but this season of Advent reminds me that I do not journey alone in the darkness of my fears, and that the promise of light is on its way. I am raising my head as I wait.

Prayer

God Who Redeems:

I know that you are near me in my times of fear and worry, even when I struggle to see you there. Help me turn to you when I feel overcome with troubles and find it hard to garner strength. Thank you for standing with me as I wait for the peace and healing that your child will deliver. Thank you for bringing us light.

Amen

Suggestion for Service

Winter, especially during an ongoing pandemic, can be a lonely and isolating time that brings about new worries. Take the time to check in on a friend you've been out of contact with, or a neighbor that you have not seen for a while. Make a point of following up with these people so that they know they are not alone or without someone who cares.

Advent Sunday Week 2 - Luke: 3:1-6

By Kevin Lopez Mader, Farm of the Child / Finca del Niño

I'm a math and science person. I've grown accustomed to finding the "right" answer. And I struggle to hold that in tension with my Christian calling to go out and build the Kingdom. Because once I step away from my coding languages and math equations, things don't operate as expected. There are no "right" words, or at least they never come to me at the right times. I can't use some well-defined order of operations to cleanly solve others' problems. I can't easily extricate myself from my complicity in structural sin or balance competing goods that have different values for people with different perspectives.

And I so dearly long for the "right" answers. I want to be able to pick up the phone and have a conversation with God where I ask for and receive clear instructions on how to best use my time to build towards a better world. But I rarely receive a clear reply.

So I'll sometimes just go out and try to fill in the nearest valley to the best of my abilities. And occasionally things fall into place and my efforts translate directly into visible results. But more often I put in effort for weeks on end and, stepping back, can't tell if I've helped or hurt the cause. Maybe I was too narrow-minded to see things from others' perspectives. Or maybe I didn't quite say the right thing. Or I thought that I needed to fix a situation and found out I was the person there least equipped for that role. Instead of filling in the valley, it can feel like I've just been pushing dirt around and have made another hole or two in the process.

And if I'm not careful, the perfectionist in me will get lulled into inaction. I'll allow myself to get caught up in considering efficiency and how to design better systems. I'll look at what others have done and start finding ways to criticize their efforts rather than my own. Or, most likely, I'll just allow myself to get distracted with anything besides my perceived ineptitude.

And sure, sometimes our efforts aren't particularly fruitful, but that doesn't give us an excuse to stop working for a better world. Nor should it allow us to slip back into our safe places, away from the margins, pretending that they don't exist. We aren't called to smooth out the rough paths all by ourselves, but we are called to do our part as a member of a larger community. We're a pilgrim people, ever journeying towards God, ever striving to build the Kingdom, ever preparing the way of the Lord. And we aren't necessarily called to get everything right the first time. But we are called to try.

Prayer

Dear Lord, I want to be your hands and feet in the world, but this world is complex and I can't always figure it out. I'm constantly besieged by questions of inadequacy. Help! Help me to make some sense out of the choices I have. Help me to act, even when I feel inadequate. Help me to do the right thing, or if there isn't quite one "right" answer, help me to choose well amidst competing goods. Help me to get out of my own head and shift my focus to others. And help us collectively seek solutions that protect the vulnerable, forgotten, and marginalized.

Amen

Suggestion for Service

Think of a friend who is already volunteering in service of a vulnerable, forgotten, or marginalized population. Ask to join them in their service this week.

Advent Sunday Week 3 - Luke 3:10-18

By Mo Kelly, Mercy Volunteer Corps, St. Vincent de Paul - Cincinnati

"What should we do?" – a question we have all asked ourselves when we see the many injustices of our society, in this ongoing pandemic; as Christians wanting to live out our faith. John the Baptist answered this question three times in the Gospel, his responses each tailored to the person asking the question. The general crowd should give to others from their surplus. The tax collectors should avoid corruption and only take the taxes that are required. The soldiers should act ethically. And when the crowd was inspired by John's words, he redirected their praise to Jesus.

When I read this Gospel, I see John asking the crowd to simplify their lives – get rid of the excess, give away from their surplus, and focus back on God. We are not called to go without or to live in scarcity, but rather to have enough and to give from our abundance. This simplicity also applies to our words, actions, and decisions. Are we letting the excess of the world distract us from God? Are our words cluttered with sugarcoating or gossip or lies, or are we straight-forward in our interactions? Are we consumed with how to serve others the "right way" and letting that inhibit our actions? Oftentimes, we overcomplicate and overcrowd our life. Once our basic needs are met, let's use this Advent season to remove the excess and return our focus to God, who sustains our spiritual needs and guides our next steps.

Prayer

God of Abundance,
In a season often filled with "more," remind me that I have all that I need through You. Lead me to can give what I can to Your people, including the gifts of my time and talents. So that I may not be distracted by the things of our world, and instead engaged in the ways of Your Love.

Amen

Suggestion for Service

There is an inherent sense of gratitude that comes from living simply. I am not readily discarding or overly consuming, but I'm being intentional with what I own. I am recognizing the value of each item that I bring into my life.

Take time with your belongings. What do you use? Is there anything you keep "just in case" but have never needed? Where are the biggest areas of clutter in your home?

Donate items with intentionality: if they are still in usable working condition and they are from your abundance, then pass them along to an ethical thrift store or non-profit.

Repurpose items rather than buying something new, such as using a glass pasta jar as a food storage container or to hold your Q-tips.

Advent Sunday Week 4 - Luke 1:39-45

By Claire Soupene, Mercy Volunteer Corps, Cristo Rey New York Volunteer Program

What a story of recognition this Sunday's gospel is. I can't help but imagine the great vulnerability that exists between these two women, that Elizabeth could understand the truth of Mary's experience from the moment she spoke. Two women, coming together to name the grace they see not only happening within themselves but within one another. Two women, of shared experience offering encouragement for the perhaps scary road ahead.

My favorite depiction of this scene is the Windsock Visitation by Brother Mickey McGrath, OSFS. Elizabeth and Mary gleefully embrace one another, their pregnant bellies touching and seemingly intermingling. Alongside them is a quote from Jane de Chantal: "This is the place of our delight and rest." Their joy shocks me every time in the most wonderful way.

I can imagine their fear so much more easily. Pregnancy is a time of great change in one's body, and so much change happening so quickly can be disorienting. Am I still the same person? Is this still the same me? Really? Are you sure? I asked these questions of myself a lot during my time as a volunteer. Things were changing fast, and at times the old me felt distant, almost like another life entirely, and that distance scared me.

This image reminds me to breathe in the joy of change. When we are deep in the trenches of transition and growth, it can be difficult to see the transformation taking place within us. Sometimes it might even feel like we're not growing at all. Maybe it just feels like we're barely getting by. These are moments that community can buoy us. It can offer us a sense of being seen or known or recognized while affirming the great grace that's happening within us even as we change.

This source of community might be your volunteer community, who like Elizabeth and Mary, are of shared experience. But it might also be those you work with or a faith community you've found or those who have known you beyond this year. Wherever you find your place of delight and rest, I pray that they reflect back to you the glory and grace of all you are becoming and that you in turn might be a mirror too.

Prayer

Mother God, you too have witnessed us growing. Share in our joy and struggles as we go forward. May our growth lead us ever closer to the person you are calling us to be, even when we are unsure where this path will lead us. And in this season of transition, may we find a home among those who allow us to delight and to rest.

Amen

Suggestions for Service

Many in our communities often go without this sense of recognition and the dignity it brings with it. This is particularly true among those facing homelessness, folks struggling with severe mental illness, and the elderly. Take an evening to volunteer at a soup kitchen or spend an afternoon at an assisted living center. Seek to reflect the dignity of those you encounter back to them. If you're unable to find an opportunity like this, spend some time researching advocacy efforts going on in your community and find ways to get involved.

Christmas Day Reflection - Luke 2:15-20

Tina Cisarik, Dominican Volunteers USA, Catholic Volunteer Network staff

"Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." (Lk 2:20a) The shepherds waited, the shepherds saw, the shepherds acted with haste. Where Advent is a time of waiting, the celebration of the Nativity on Christmas calls us into a time of acting and rejoicing. Christmas is an invitation, a challenge of sorts, to carry the glory of our Lord's humble birth to others.

This is easier said than done, as the days following Christmas often unfold with exhausting travel, jam-packed workdays, and a desire to return to a more normal routine. On the outside, it often looks as though the celebration is over. Decorations are put away in dusty closets. Your inbox overflows with urgent requests before the new year begins. However, the role of the shepherds in this Gospel reminds us that the story of our newborn Savior lives on – in our words, our actions, and our praise—if only we let it.

After all, the shepherds are much like us (and those in the communities where we live and serve beside). They are blue collar workers in the margins of society, laboring to make ends meet. They are human people with human concerns. Yet it is through them that the truth of Jesus' birth is revealed: a humble child, born to a young mother in an unfamiliar land, has come to liberate us, guide us, and unite us in his love. And it is through them that others are invited into this ever lasting story.

Now it is our turn to do the same. Your invitation today is to be a carrier of this Truth to others, to consider how you as an individual and as a member of your community can be a messenger of such Good News far beyond the Christmas season. Today, you're invited to learn as the shepherds learned, believe as the shepherds believed, and rejoice as the shepherds rejoiced. Go bring Christmas to others!

Prayer

God of Humility and Freedom,
Thank you for the gift of your child, who came to us in a familiar way, so we could more deeply see the purpose you have set out for us. Guide us in your wisdom to carry the story of your Child's birth to others we encounter, especially those who are hurting and in need of your liberating love, and those who keep others oppressed. May we notice those who reveal to us the face of the infant Jesus, and may they notice his face in us.

Amen

Service Suggestion

Many causes, nonprofit organizations, and community programs are well-funded and supported during the holidays, but struggle during the rest of the year. To keep the message of Christmas alive long after the season, I invite you to contact an organization you learned about this season (or have volunteered with in the past) and find out the best way to be involved the rest of the year. Whether the program addresses hunger or refugee resettlement, childhood literacy or foster care, prison ministry or human rights, use the Christmas Gospel as inspiration to seek the face of God in others, especially those often pushed to the margins. Don't forget to share about this cause or program with others, as we are stronger as the Body of Christ!

About Us:



Catholic Apostolate Center

Reviving Faith • Rekindling Charity • Forming Apostles

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.

For more information visit: www.catholicvolunteernetwork.org