

# Advent Alphabet

SUNDAY NOVEMBER 28 - CHRISTMAS EVE DECEMBER 24



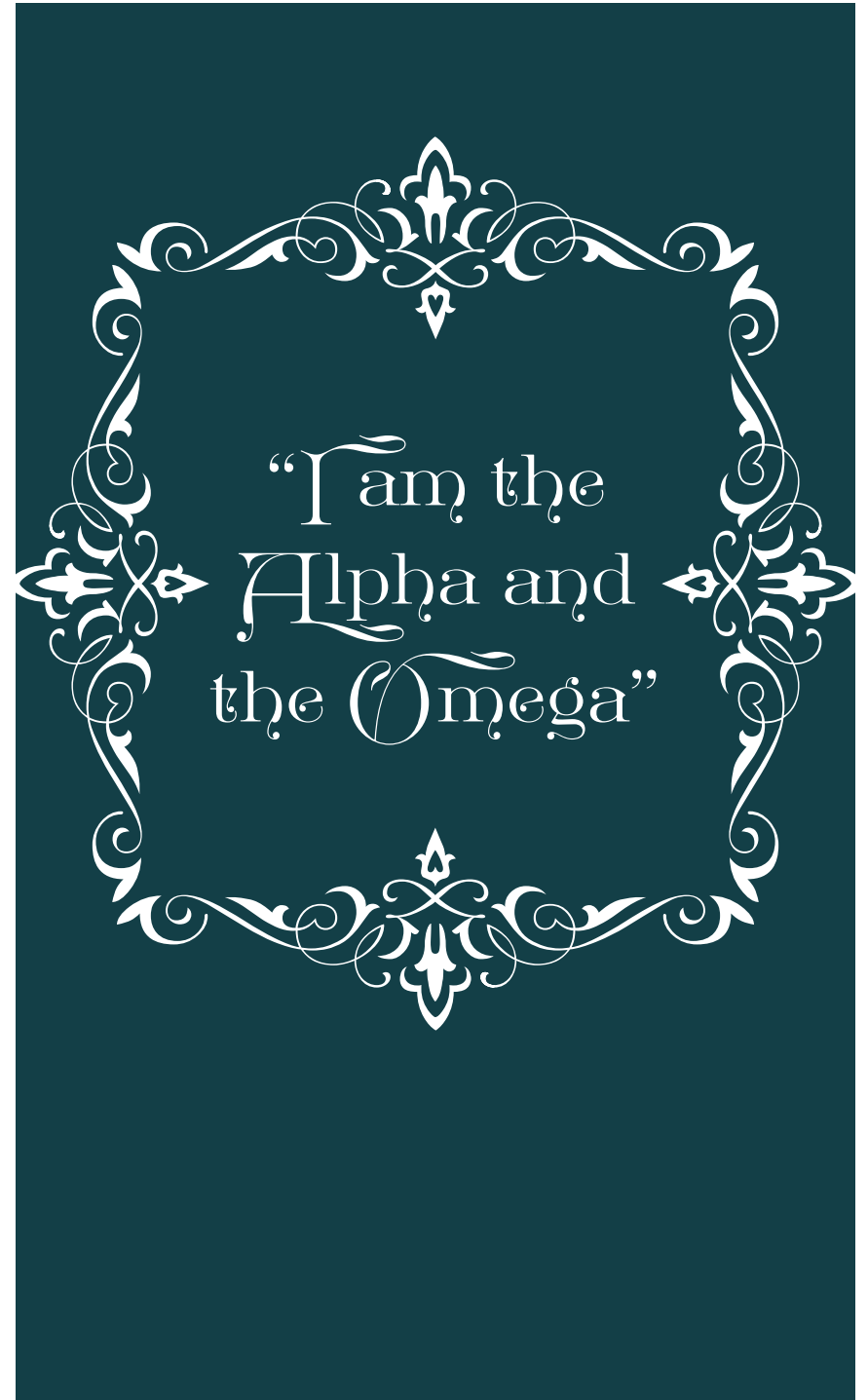
# Introduction

The letters of the alphabet are magic.

**They belong to each other, and when put together rightly they make words, and words build sentences, and sentences create stories, and stories lead us to truths by which we make sense of life.**

Jesus, of course, knew the transformative force that imbues every letter, and so he described himself as “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” employing the first and last letters of the 25-letter Greek alphabet as a metaphor to help us glimpse the dimension of reality that he inhabits. Through these two common letters whose only prominence is their position in the Greek alphabet, Jesus expressed the blinding illumination: I am Being itself. I am the one you seek and hope for. I am the one who knows you most fully and heals you most completely. With me you are complete.

This Advent Reader is organized around the letters of the English alphabet, each of which is the first letter in a word that has been rendered more luminous by its association with Advent. These Advent words illuminate the Way toward God.



# A is for Annunciation

Advent Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Announcement of the Incarnation by the angel Gabriel to Mary

## Personal Reflections:

Annunciation is the word we Christians use for the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would give birth to a very special child.

On the surface, Gabriel's announcement doesn't seem a big deal. It wouldn't have made today's "Breaking News." Mary's whole situation was marked by commonness and, after all, anything plain and common can't be interesting, can't be worth my attention. Mary was likely a teenager living in a village of perhaps 500 people, located 2500 miles from Rome, the epicenter of power. It's as if CNN interrupted its regular programming with Breaking News that the sun had risen yet again this morning. Yawn. This is breaking news?

But Gabriel delivered startling news: you will give birth to a son who is God himself. The young woman would become, in fact, the chosen method of the Incarnation.

In W.H. Auden's poetic expression of Advent, For the Time Being, Gabriel tells Mary:

Hear, child, what I am sent to tell:

Love wills your dream happen, so

Love's will on earth may be, through you,

No longer a pretend, but true.

Now that's breaking news! We no longer have to pretend that God cares for us. We don't have to pretend that we have his attention. We don't have to pretend that God is near to help us. The Annunciation heralded something better than breaking news: it announced Good News.

## Heart prayer for this day:

You are the God of hopes and wounds,  
dreams and fears,  
the author and giver of all good things.

Thank you for this Good News  
that makes us forever safe.

# B is for Bethlehem

Advent Reading: Luke 2:1-20 Joseph and Mary and the birth of their first-born son

## Personal Reflections:

My internal picture of Bethlehem on that very first Christmas Eve has been shaped by the carol O Little Town of Bethlehem. I imagine silence and stillness infusing the very air over the little village, and the quiet night sky glittering with pinprick stars, each of which sang of a world unimaginably beyond the nearby hills. And a strangely bright star perched low in the sky, larger and brighter than a full moon, illuminating the silence and stillness as if it were an astonishingly powerful lantern, and as if Bethlehem were the single spot worthy of its shining.

The first section of the birth narrative in Luke 2 is very understated: Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth. An altogether ordinary story, which surprises us after having read the astounding events conveyed in Luke's opening chapter.

But then Luke jerks us into reality: that the stillness of that night in Bethlehem was far different than all the stillnesses that had come before. All creation had been waiting for the words of the angel:

I bring you good news of great joy!

And the shepherds acted on behalf of all creation by running to the newborn child in the manger, a child who had entered into the world he had created.

## Heart prayer for this day:

Let even the small rejoice!

Let even the great rejoice!

Let even the babes rejoice!

Let even the aged rejoice!

For the One who is God-with-us has come,

The Demolisher of all evil and death has come,

Our Connector to God has come!



# G is for Child

Advent Reading: Philippians 2:3-8 the Child who makes God accessible

## Personal Reflections:

There is a stream of old folktales from Eastern Europe that features a Glass Mountain. In these stories, a boy or girl – and sometime both -- walks a path that leads to a glass mountain. They can't turn back, and they can't go around the mountain; their only choice is to climb it. But the mountain that looms above them is a sheer face of glass – no footholds, no handholds.

At times, I think of God as a Glass Mountain, the summit of which is remote, inaccessible, unattainable. It's often during a moment in which I feel orphaned from God, beaten down by the wounds and terrors of life, or my own self-punitive narrative. If climbing to the summit of the Glass Mountain is a metaphor for knowing God, then I'm bereft of hope

The Child of Bethlehem is our only hope. In the Child, God painted himself in one broad sweep across heaven. The Child was a self-portrait, given so that we could look upon his face, hear his words, and have an inkling as to what he's like. Here, look here, the Child says. If you could climb the Glass Mountain, the summit would look like this. Look at me and see God.

In W.H. Auden's poetic expression of Advent, For the Time Being, the angels bid the shepherds to rejoice in the unimaginably good news that the Child has made God accessible:

*And generations  
Of the unborn all  
Are leaping for joy...  
That after today  
The children of men  
May be certain that  
The Father Abyss  
Is affectionate  
To all Its creatures,*

## Heart prayer for this day:

*It was not enough for God to send his Son to point out the way - he made his Son the way itself, so that we can go on our journey guided by him as he walks along his own way.*

*Augustine*

# D is for Dream

Advent Reading: Psalm 126 Jesus is the Dream & Desire of our heart

## Personal Reflections:

Neil Gaiman's mesmerizing, modern epic The Sandman featured seven siblings, each of whom represented and ruled an aspect of human life. Each of their names began with the letter D: Dream, his twin sister Death, Destiny, Despair, Desire, Delirium and Destruction.

Gaiman first thought of becoming a writer on his 7th birthday, which was the day he first read C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia. In honor of that connection, I'm using the letter D for Dream in describing Jesus.

It was as if we were walking in a dream. That first sentence in today's Advent Reading describes in euphoric language the joy of those who were making their way home to Jerusalem after the long, catastrophic exile in Babylon. It was as if we were walking in a dream. Their wildest dream had come true.

How much more, then, is Jesus our Dream-Come-True, the one for whom our soul yearns and hopes. For what can be imagined or dreamed more beautiful than a kind God, a God who takes on our terrors and wounds and fears, a God who loves us beyond our zaniest dream, a God who never ceases in his attention to us, and whose endgame with us is the cure of our souls. He is, indeed, "the Desire of all nations" (Haggai 2:7)

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Let the dreamers come,  
let them walk the Way  
that leads toward home.  
Let the dreamers see,  
let their eyes take in  
God's Guaranty.  
For they walk the High-Way  
that leads to dreams come true,  
all things made new  
on God's Eighth Day.*

# It is for Love

Advent Reading: Revelation 21:1-6 Our God has brought to us a New Day.

## Personal Reflections:

In the Genesis account, Adam named his wife Eve in that she “would be the mother of all the living.” Yet she has been censured throughout human history for doing nothing more than I do every day, which is to think and act with a me-first priority.

Eve’s hope is my hope: God is in the renovation business. Thank goodness God is not “making new things” – that is, ditching me – but “making all things new”, scouring us clean and changing the direction of our love. God is bringing his treasured creation back full circle to fresh newness.

This gracious remaking is illustrated in the astonishing artwork Mary and Eve, by Sister Grace Remington, from Sisters of the Mississippi Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa. Drawn in pencil and crayon, it is an extraordinary expression of gracious kindness and comfort. Mary stands to the right, full with child and clothed in a white robe and blue cloak. She is reaching out to caress Eve’s cheek, an intimate act of gentle care and love.

A downcast Eve is clothed only in her long hair and is still clutching a piece of fruit in her right hand. But Mary has taken Eve’s left hand in hers and placed both on her pregnant belly. All is not lost. The Rescuer is coming. Here, feel him. Eve’s sorrow and Mary’s joy draw them to the Child.

Inspired by the drawing, another sister at the Abbey wrote a poem imagining Mary’s words for this moment as Mary and Eve together touched the unborn baby:

*My mother, my daughter, life-giving Eve  
Do not be ashamed, do not grieve.  
The former things have passed away  
Our God has brought to us a New Day.  
See, I am with Child, through whom all will be reconciled.  
O, Eve! My sister, my friend  
We will rejoice together, forever  
Life without end.*

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Jesus, like us, you are the son of Eve,  
the woman you formed in the youngest days.  
I rejoice with her that you’ve brought about  
An Eighth Day, in which all things are made new.*

1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2 And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

5 And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

6 And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

*Revelation 21:1-6*

# F is for Father Christmas Letters

Advent Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:2-3 God's comfort for all our hurts

## Personal Reflections:

Every year from 1920 to 1942, the four children in the Tolkien household – first John, and later Michael, Christopher and Priscilla – received a letter from Father Christmas. The letters began arriving when John was a three-year-old and continued until the youngest children were teens.

Each year the mysterious envelope appeared on their fireplace. It bore North Pole stamps and postage marks and was addressed to the children in spidery handwriting. Inside the strange envelope was a letter written in the same spidery script and describing the adventures and goings-on at the North Pole, accompanied by illustrations. The letters and drawings often featured the clumsy hijinks of Father Christmas' good hearted but mischievous helper, North Polar Bear or NPD for short, who was adept at knocking over Christmas trees and freezing his tongue to the North Pole.

The actual author of the letters, of course, was the four children's loving father, JRR Tolkien, Oxford professor and scholar, and now famous for his epic myth Lord of the Ring. The Tolkien children kept every letter they received from Father Christmas and published the collection as a loving tribute to their father on the 3rd anniversary of his death.

Each time I re-read Tolkien's Letters from Father Christmas, I'm reminded that Advent is a yearly letter from God our Father. It is an invitation, from a loving father to his children, to remember the wonder and the adventure of life with him. The good news is that the adventure is open to all, even to those of us who are nothing special.

Like shepherds who were trying to stay awake and ready to fight off predators or thieves, when suddenly angels sang, "Listen!"

Like three pilgrims making a long, long journey to a place in which they knew they would be unwelcomed, all for a strange star that beckoned them, "Follow!"

And like a frightened unmarried girl petrified that her most scandalous fear had come upon her, all for a God who said, "Wake."

# G is for Grace

Advent Reading: Luke 15:1-10 the God of persistent, insistent grace

## Personal Reflections:

In February 1843, passengers onboard the good ship Owen Glendower off the Cape of Good Hope reported a "short, dagger-like object" that closely followed the sun toward the western horizon.

This dagger was the Great Comet of 1843, a collection of rocks and dust and gas that had been pulled and stretched and brightened as it screamed toward the sun, around which it orbited every 600-800 years. Eventually the comet's streaming tale stretched 200 million miles, a distance greater than the orbit of the planet Mars.

Modern astronomers classify the Great Comet of 1843 as one of the largest of the family of "sungrazers" that make their way from the distant borders of our Solar System, so attracted by the sun's gravitational pull that they graze the Sun's outer atmosphere.

I think that God's grace is like gravity. Grace is the gravity of a persistent and insistent God who pulls us, incrementally and inexorably, toward him, despite the fact that we spend too many moments running the other way as hard as we can run. Despite the fact that we are the human equivalent of a comet's rocks and dust and gas, God attracts us with his beams of wonder, pulling and stretching and brightening our souls. If a comet has the ability to think, perhaps it wonders "Why is that star so infatuated with me?" So it is for us creatures caught in the fortunate pull of God's gravity:

*What is there in my heart that you should sue  
so fiercely for its love? What kind of care  
brings you as though a stranger to my door  
through the long night and in the icy dew  
seeking the heart that will not harbor you,  
that keeps itself religiously secure?*

*Geoffrey Hill: Lachrimae Amantis*

# H is for Hope

Advent Reading: Matthew 12:9-21 And his name will be the hope of all the world

## Personal Reflections:

Pandora's Box, the ancient Greek myth originally written six centuries before the birth of Jesus, has prompted many variants over the centuries. For example, in some variants Pandora intentionally opened the jar left in her care, while in other versions she was deceived to do so. As to the contents that escaped before Pandora could hastily close the jar, one version defined them as the evils that afflict the world, evils such as sickness and death, while another version described them as the wondrous gifts of the gods, gifts that now have been lost. What makes the myth significant, however, is that every version of the myth, from original to modern, has identified hope as the one thing remaining in the box.

I think that ancient myths contain true things that are waiting for the One True Thing who makes them come fully alive. So it is with hope in the story of Pandora and her box. The true thing in her story is that we humans cannot cope with life's wounds and fears without hope.

Yet there is tension in hope. While hope is indispensable, we lack accessibility to it. That is, we have an innate hope for things that lie beyond our accessibility. We hope and yearn that God exists and is good. We hope and long that death is not the end, and that we and our loved ones are not simply erased when consciousness unwinds from the body. We hope and ache for all creation to be set right, that all hurt and harm and suffering be cast away forever.

Hope, then, is a signpost that points toward the One who makes it come alive, the One who is God's Guaranty that our hopes are not in vain. As today's Advent Reading concludes with a crescendo: the mere sound of his name will signal hope, even among far-off unbelievers. (The Message)

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Jesus, in your name I hope.  
You, gentlest of Ways,  
You, authentic and incredible Truth,  
You, my sustaining Life.  
Your very name is Hope.*

# I is for Incarnation

Advent Reading: John 1:1-5, 14-18 God as plain as day

## Personal Reflections:

John, the closest confidante and friend of Jesus and the one to whom Jesus entrusted the care of his very own mother, began his Gospel narrative with a spellbinding description of God's overwhelming entry into human reality. Being itself appeared. The Creator became creature.

God's approach was the opposite of that described in Greek mythology. When Greek gods such as Zeus would disguise themselves as humans for purposes of deceit and deception, no human could recognize them, as long as the gods remained in disguise,

Not so with God: Here I am. I'm standing right in front of you. I know it's difficult for you to know it's me, so I'm sending angels and a herald to call your attention to me, and I will do remarkable marvels that only I can do, most of those marvels having to do with healing you of fear and hurt and suffering. And you already know my voice. Listen.

Jesus spilled into our midst in order to be recognized. Eugene Peterson's translation of John 1:18 captures it perfectly: Jesus came to make God "as plain as day." Jesus came to be seen and to describe the unimaginably complex God who cannot be seen by human eyes. There is much about God we would not know were it not for Jesus.

## Heart prayer for this day:

# Jesus, you are the Light of the World,

*so that we, rather than being blinded by God's sheer brightness,  
too bright for us to see,  
may see his face clearly.*

*Help me not undo my gaze from your light.*

# J is for Joseph

Advent Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

## Personal Reflections:

The Gospel of Matthew relates the birth narrative of Jesus from a male perspective, specifically that of Joseph. Such a perspective is unsurprising, given that Matthew opened his Gospel narrative with a detailed genealogy tracing Joseph's lineage back some fifteen or twenty centuries to Abraham, founder of the Hebrew people. Yet no permutation of fathers and sons in this list was asked to bear a burden equal to that of Joseph.

While Mary was asked to be the birth-mother of Jesus even though a virgin, Joseph was asked to play only an auxiliary role in the conception and birth of his own son. Unlike every male in his lineage, Joseph was not the initiator of his first-born son's conception. The angel's words must have provoked intense spiritual turmoil. Both he and Mary would be exposed to gossip, embarrassment, and ridicule. Surely Joseph heard snickers and open questions about his son's paternity and his wife's faithfulness.

It's no wonder that the angel urged him to act with courage in marrying Mary. Joseph was being asked to act in faith at the most intimate level conceivable: the woman he loved would bear a child that was not of his origination. Some men in his lineage had been disinterested fathers and husbands; Joseph was asked to be unlike them.

I wonder: how many times in their marriage did Joseph hold Mary to his heart as she wept from wounding gossip? Perhaps he comforted her with words such as these:

*You didn't need me to bear this Child,  
This newborn, this babe, God in disguise.  
But I wouldn't have known a God so wild  
As to use you and me to reprise  
His loved creation. For this One in our arms,  
The star shines and the angel voices sing,  
Shepherds roam and kings sense alarm,  
For he is Morningstar with healing in his wings.  
Tonight we are his spies, but in time he will create  
An endless stream at heaven's wide gate.  
Joseph's Song to Mary, stanza 2 Birth*



# K is for Kindness

Advent Reading: Titus 3:4-7 the very Kindness of God

## Personal Reflections:

There is much about God that we would not know absent Jesus. At the top of my list is the hope that God is kind, for what could be imagined more marvelous than a good and kind God? And what could be more needed?

Jesus was the One who came directly from God's heart and who knew God's heart better than anyone. It was as if he went into God's storehouse of kindness and bathed himself in it, so that everyone he touched and addressed was washed with kindness.

It was Jesus who said: Let me tell you what God is like. He is like a shepherd who has plenty of sheep, but one lone sheep has wandered away. The shepherd cares so much for his sheep that he searches every pastureland and rocky slope and wilderness until he locates the lost one. The shepherd scoops the sheep into his arms and holds it closely all the way home, and then he sings for joy to his neighbors that he has found his sheep.

Such glimmerings persuade us to entrust the cure of our soul to this Kind One who came from the middle of God's heart.

## Heart prayer for this day:

God, you are good.

You are holding me as a mother holds an infant,  
so close that their heartbeats are one.

You are singing to the angels about me  
as you dance in the joy of love.





# L is for Light

Advent Reading: Matthew 4:12-17 the Lantern of the Good God

## Personal Reflections:

The Lantern of the Good God has shone for 800 years. It is the popular nickname for Metz Cathedral in north-eastern France. Sparkling light bathes the church's interior due to the distinctive honey-like glow of local limestone used in its construction and the dazzling colors of 70,000 square feet of stained glass, an expanse that is among the world's largest.

To sit in Metz Cathedral is to have one's soul bathed in light, a light that emanates from stone and glass that depict the Gospel. It is to be reminded by numinous materials that Jesus is the Light of the world. It is to be reminded that Jesus' light is self-transcending in that wherever Jesus is, there is light, and it's enough light for us to live in.

In today's Advent Reading, the Gospel of Matthew laid bare the reality contained in Jesus' initial step in announcing the Good News that God has come near. His bright light began to flood darkened souls.

Years later, Paul wrote to some of those whose lives had been illumined by God's Lantern, Jesus:

God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:6 (Common English Bible)

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Jesus, you are the Lantern of the Good God,  
the God of light,  
illumined by your own self.  
I desperately need your light.  
I too often stumble around in the dark,  
and the dark frightens me.  
I beg you, flood my heart with your light.  
shine on me, you who are the Lantern of God.*

# M is for Mary

Advent Reading: Luke 1:38-56 Mary magnifies the Lord

## Personal Reflections:

As we read the Gospel narratives over and over again – which we should do – we have to guard against our familiarity leading us to de-humanize the characters. That is, losing sight of the reality that they were people like us, with very human traits such as courage, fear, perseverance, doubt.

The late Rachel Held Evans had this in mind when she observed about Mary:

Much could be said in contrast about the “real Mary” of the biblical narrative: the teenage girl from Nazareth who gave birth on a dirty stable floor; the terrified mom who scurried frantically through the streets of Jerusalem, looking for her lost little boy; the woman who had enough influence over Jesus to convince him to liven up a wedding with his first miracle of turning water into wine; the grieved mother who wept in the shadow of the cross.

The snapshots of Mary in the Gospel documents should convince us of her humanity. Even more so, the Gospel pages show her living out the reality that every decision we make shapes our soul. That is, every decision changes the substance of who we are and our disposition for the next time. Each decision, whether big or small, moves us either toward God or not.

Mary's assent to be the birth-mother of Jesus was as real a decision as the mundane decisions that face us. She was a young woman confronted with extraordinary news that would change her life forever. When I read Luke's account, I sense that all creation waited for her answer: Then Mary said, “I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her. Luke 1:38.

W.H. Auden captures this moment in his poetic expression of Advent, For the Time Being, by having Gabriel tell Mary:

*What I am willed to ask, your own  
Will has to answer; child, it lies  
Within your power of choosing to  
Conceive the Child who chooses you.*



# N is for Name

Advent Reading: John 10:1-5, 11-15 the God who knows us by name

## Personal reflections:

Jesus employed an extended metaphor of sheep and shepherd to describe the intensely personal nature of his love for us. He used this shepherd/sheep metaphor to draw in sharp relief the reality of our limitless belonging to him. His remarkable words echo in our hearts: I call my own sheep by name.

I confess that I'm often annoyed that the Gospel narratives exclude the names of many of the people Jesus healed or helped.

The unnamed woman dragged before Jesus by an abusive religious mob (John 8)

The unnamed woman in Luke 7 who courageously ventured into a dinner party at which she knew she would be unwelcome, but she was impelled by gratitude to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and hair.

The ten unnamed lepers in Luke 17 that Jesus healed and then instructed to fulfill their religious ceremonial obligation. I'd especially like to know the name of the one newly-healed leper who returned to thank Jesus.

The unnamed paralyzed man whose friends lowered him on a mat through the roof of a house because they had been unable to carry him through the crowds blocking the door of the house.

The unnamed man in Mark 7 who could neither speak nor hear. Jesus touched the man's tongue and ears and then said Be opened.

I want to know more. I want to know each person's name and story. What had happened in their life-story to bring them to the point recorded in the Gospel narrative? What did they do in their following years, given the intrusion of grace that spilled into their heart?

Perhaps, though, knowing their names would distract me from the Gospel story. Perhaps that was the Gospel-Makers' intention: to hold the reader's attention on Jesus and his kindness.

Perhaps, too, it gives me sanction to insert my name into the story, to hear as if with my own ears Jesus say Be opened or Grab your mat and walk or Your sins are forgiven.

And, even more likely, the absence of names is a gentle reminder that my own name is unknown from a global or historical perspective. I am, indeed, just like these unnamed recipients of Jesus' kindness.

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Jesus, we know the names of only some of your friends.*

*But not all of them.*

*Not the names of family and friends at the wedding in Cana, where waterpots became special.*

*Not the name of the widow of Nain, who went from desperation to ecstasy.*

*Not the name of the woman catastrophically crippled for 18 torturous years*

*or the woman who rained tears on your feet*

*or the man who lived among the tombs.*

*We know that you know our name – and you know all the names we call ourselves.*

You have the care and cure  
of our souls in your hands.

Keep us steady.



# O is for Open

Advent Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7 Jesus is the Wonder of a Counselor

## Personal reflections:

We humans instinctively open our mouth when we're struck by joyous, unexpected wonder: a marriage proposal, a brother home from war, a surgeon's news that a loved one will live. In these moments, we often hold our hands over our mouth lest our heart escape.

Surely Mary's eyes widened and her mouth opened as her heart trembled at Gabriel's greeting.

Surely the unnamed woman in John's Gospel who was accused of adultery by a religious mob opened her mouth in wondrous surprise at Jesus' kind words: "You matter. You're not the sexual toy of some man. You're not this crowd's tool of rage and revenge and self-righteousness. You are the treasure of God – now start down the path of healing."

Surely the woman in Luke's Gospel who had been catastrophically crippled by a terrible affliction that had bent her double for eighteen years, surely this woman clasped her hands to her open mouth when she wondrously looked at the sky and the faces of her loved ones and Jesus' eyes.

And surely the sisters Mary and Martha fell to their knees, transfixed and open-mouthed, when their dead brother walked out of his tomb.

I wonder, then: is wonder a precondition of wisdom? Might my moments of distraction and indolence as a follower of Jesus simply be the result of a diminishment in my sense of wonder? When we were children, we loved fairytales because they were filled with wonder – magic mirrors and rings, dragons and beasts, heroes and adventure. Perhaps as adults our sense of wonder is rusted. Fortunately, our Soul-Counselor is himself a Wonder, a one-of-a-kind Wonder. And he is the same counselor who created wonder in Mary, and in the unnamed women in the Gospels, and in Mary and Martha.

## Heart prayer for this day:

*Jesus, you are the music  
that I hear so faintly  
at the deep center of my soul.  
Sometimes I have to be very quiet  
in order to hear it, but it's always there,  
a song singing to my heart.  
What a Wonder you are.*

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations.

<sup>2</sup> The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

<sup>3</sup> Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

<sup>4</sup> For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

<sup>5</sup> For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

<sup>6</sup> For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Isaiah 9:1-7

# R is for Pilgrim

Advent Reading: Isaiah 35 God's High-Way

## Personal reflections:

Christians for centuries have taken pilgrimages. Such treks were so popular that Dante and Chaucer framed their 14th century epics around a pilgrimage. Today more than 300,000 people each year follow the 12th century Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James) that stretches 500 miles along an ancient Roman trade route from the French side of the Pyrenees across northern Spain to the shrine of the apostle James in the cathedral of Santiago.

One Christmas my wife and I took something of a pilgrimage. We were in England to visit our daughter and her husband, so we took the 45-minute train ride to Oxford, a place that for me is forever associated with C.S. Lewis.

On an English winter day, the sun noticeably begins to set at mid-afternoon, but nothing could dim the wonder as we walked High Street toward Magdalen College (pronounced "Maudlin"), where Lewis taught for half a century. We stopped to kneel in the darkened silence of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, in whose pews and windows students sat on the occasions Lewis was asked to address the student body. Then – marvel of marvels! – we stood at the gate of Magdalen, shuttered for Christmas break, and saw with our own eyes the college chapel where Lewis began every day with Morning Prayer, and beyond the courtyard the New Building in which were Lewis' rooms. His rooms were on the second floor near the middle of the building, directly to the right of the protruding center section, above the wisteria. Then, of course, we took tea at The Rose Oxford tea house across the street.

Why do we take pilgrimages, even we modernists? I think it's because we yearn to step out of ourselves; to find a place that overcomes all the background noise and pandemonium that normally fills our senses and brain. It's only in such stillness that we hear and see that our whole life is a pilgrimage toward God, that insistent and persistent God who has built a High Way to him, then summons us to walk it toward him, and keeps us safe on the way.

Eugene Peterson's The Message has translated today's Advent Reading in beautiful and gracious language:

*There will be a highway  
called the Holy Road.  
No one rude or rebellious  
is permitted on this road.  
It's for GOD's people exclusively—  
impossible to get lost on this road.  
Not even fools can get lost on it.  
No lions on this road,  
no dangerous wild animals—  
Nothing and no one dangerous or threatening.  
Only the redeemed will walk on it.  
The people GOD has ransomed  
will come back on this road.  
They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion,  
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,  
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness  
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.*

## Heart prayer for this day:

Jesus, thank goodness you're the God of Pilgrims,  
for I've lost my way again.  
Sometimes I don't sense that you are there.  
Sometimes I don't feel that your arms are outstretched.  
Sometimes I don't feel welcome in your arms.  
Yet each time I'm persuaded that you are far away, you announce  
that you are near.  
And once you arrive, you're always here.



# Q is for Quiet

Advent Reading: 1 John 3:18-20 God is greater than our worried hearts

## Personal reflections:

It was quiet and still on that first Christmas Eve, when God the Universe-Crosser stepped from behind borders of blinding light and made plain as day something we could never have seen on our own: God's inexhaustible reservoir of kindness.

The shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem surely were quiet as they listened for any sound of threat to their sheep.

The Magi surely were quiet as they trudged the long miles from their homeland, tracking a very strange star.

The star made no noise as it blazed above Bethlehem, beaming as if the birthplace of God's Son were the single spot in all heaven and earth worthy of its incandescence.

And surely Mary and Joseph gazed at their just-born son in quiet wonderment. Given that both parents had spoken with God's messenger Gabriel, perhaps they whispered to their special son:

*what must have been your words  
to tell the Father your wish  
to come to earth to save  
those thrown upon the waves.*

But how do I integrate into my life such quiet and stillness? I have an intense longing for a coherent interior life, yet too often within me is a savage clamor of spiritual anxieties. What can bring peace to my spirit?

Fortunately, I have advice from the Apostle John, a close confidant of Jesus and faithful to the end of his long life: "God is greater than my worried heart." Ah yes, that's God's prescription for spiritual anxiety! I have to continually integrate grace, which is the fact that God is the One who knows me absolutely and yet still loves me completely.

## Heart prayer of this day:

*Jesus, I am awash with anxiety and worry every day.  
Please help me.  
Soothe me, I beg you.  
Comfort me in the one place I can be comforted – in your arms.*

# R is for Rescuer

Advent Reading: Luke 7:18-23 Help for the Helpless

## Personal Reflections:

As JRR Tolkien convalesced in 1916 to recover from trench fever, a chronically debilitating condition that ravaged WW1 soldiers, he began writing the very first story in his epic legend of Middle-earth. In the story, the Elf princess Lúthien and her husband traveled at great peril to rescue friends that had been imprisoned in the horrible pits of Sauron's stronghold. When the couple reached the bridge at the fortress gate, the princess began her rescue by ... singing!

In that hour Luthien came, and standing upon the bridge that led to Sauron's isle she sang a song that no walls of stone could hinder...Luthien stood upon the bridge and declared her power, and the spell was loosed from stone to stone, and the gates were thrown down, and the walls opened, and the pits laid bare; and many thralls and captives came forth in wonder and dismay, shielding their eyes against the moonlight, for they had long lain in the darkness...

Today's Advent Reading offers this same breathless picture of rescue. Luke inserts the question of John the Baptist among three marvels: Jesus' healing a centurion's desperately ill servant, Jesus' bringing back to life the only son of a widow, and his exchange with a woman who had been so brutalized that she rained tears on his feet. The question from John the Baptist's prison cell is equally desperate: Jesus, I'm about to die. I need to know that you are authentic, so that I can have hope.

Jesus' response is bereft of propositional argument. Look around you, John. Those who have long been helpless and held captive now are coming forth from their dark prison.

His words summon a swath of stories from the gigantic storehouse of the Gospels:

*A widow burying her only son  
A father with an unhealable son  
A woman catastrophically crippled for 18 years  
A tortured man who lived in a graveyard  
A leper cut off from all affection  
Two sisters with a dead brother  
A hungry crowd far from home.*

# S is for Simeon the God-Holder

Advent Reading: Luke 2:25-35 Simeon the God-Holder

## Personal reflections:

Simeon was a good man who waited and waited and waited. He was waiting for God to do what he promised, which was to send the Rescuer. Simeon somehow knew that he himself would live to see God's promise fulfilled. And so he waited, attentive and expectant.

After a long lifetime of waiting, Simeon rejoiced to hold the very Rescuer in his arms. Simeon held the very "Desire of all Nations", the one they most longed for, the most treasured object they could imagine. I wonder whether Simeon was surprised that his protracted waiting had come to fruition in the form of a weeks-old infant? I suspect there was an element of surprise mixed with his joy and relief.

Although Simeon's story is somewhat jarring to modern minds in that we reject patience and waiting as personal affronts, I have to admit that I have much in common with him. Like Simeon, I am waiting on God for the next steps in my story, as well as for God's recalibration of all things that will be brought about by the Rescuer's return. The question, then, is how do I wait?

As usual, Augustine's insight into the Gospels is wise counsel, though challenging:

The entire life of a good Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire. You do not yet see what you long for, but the very act of desiring prepares you, so that when he comes you may see and be utterly satisfied...

And this is how God deals with us. Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us.

So, my brethren, let us continue to desire, for we shall be filled

## Heart Prayer for this day:

Jesus, I am incompetent at waiting. I'm no Simeon.  
Help me learn to wait.  
Help me to sense deep in my soul that waiting is good for me.



# T is for Three Wise Men

Advent Reading: Matthew 2:1-12 a long walk to see God

## Personal Reflections:

Immediately after relating the story of Jesus' birth, the Gospel of Matthew records a surprising visit from afar. Matthew describes the visitors simply as "Magi from the east." In typical Gospel narrative fashion, we know little about the visitors: their names, the places from where they began their trek, what prompted them to begin such a journey into a land in which they were outsiders in every sense.

The magi then vanished as suddenly as they appeared. I wonder: what did they talk about during the days or weeks as they journeyed home? Did their meeting the Child change them? What was the story of the rest of their lives? But their story is akin to a Jane Austen novel that ends when the lovers marry but reveals nothing about the many years of married life. All we have is Matthew's narrative, and perhaps that's the point.

It may be that "God with us" is a description that signifies more than we think. Perhaps Matthew placed these mysterious visitors precisely here in his Gospel narrative in order to make clear that God's offer of nearness includes everyone, even those that I might consider outside the borders of grace. Such a likelihood is humbling.

I find the magi inspiring. They had heard rumors of God and followed after a star that seemed to overbrim its boundaries, sitting as it were on the rim between heaven and earth. The star could have asked them to come away forever and they would have done so. The unnamed magi, then, encourage those of us who find ourselves unable to follow such a difficult path.

## Heart Prayer for the day:

*God speaks to each of us,  
Then walks with us silently out of the night.  
These are the words we dimly hear:  
You, sent out beyond your recall,  
Go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.  
René Rilke Love Poems to God*



# U is for Unexpected

Advent Reading: 1 John 1:1-4 the unexpected, but hope for, has come true

## Personal Reflections:

The letter U is a cousin of the letter D in the Advent Alphabet. While D represents Dream in that Jesus is our wildest Dream, our most personal and intense desire, the letter U illustrates Unexpected. None of us expect our wildest, zaniest, most desired dreams to actually come true. Put on a small scale, we don't expect to awaken from a dream about good food and find our stomach filled.

But the Good News is that Jesus is our Dream-Come-True. That is, God has so arranged existence that we dream and yearn and hope that God is there and that he is good, and then Jesus arrived as the persuasion that God is indeed all that we imagined and more so.

Such an outrageous and audacious reality is completely unexpected. It's no wonder that even John, who had been Jesus' closest confidante, could barely write a sentence when he tried to describe what he had experienced:

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in – we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us.

Eugene Peterson in his translation *The Message*

We catch this notion of excited surprise when we read the Gospel accounts of people who encountered Jesus and unexpectedly were treated with considerate kindness:

The woman hauled before Jesus in John 8 did not expect to be treated with such sensitivity.

The leper in Luke 5 did not expect to be touched.

Zacchaeus did not expect Jesus to notice him at all, much less be singled out to host dinner.

# V is for Virgin

Advent Reading: Galatians 4:4-7 born among us of a woman

## Personal Reflections:

Jazzy, who is one of our three cats, has trained me to participate in a standard protocol each time he runs upstairs to eat. Jazzy insists upon three acts. First, we begin at the foot of the stairs with my scratching his head and praising his good looks and sweet nature. After 10-15 seconds, he scampers a few stairsteps to the landing, at which point I repeat the scratching and praising. Finally he dashes to the top of the stairs and stops, looking back over his shoulder at me, which is my signal to stroke and praise a third time. Only then does he stroll to his food dishes. This process occurs 8-10 times a day.

I must be performing this duty well because our other two cats, who are keen observers of Jazzy, have begun to mimic his practice. But what I am not, is needed.

In a sense, this point illustrates the Incarnation. Every one of the estimated 100 billion births in human history has been triggered by the physical actions of a male and a female in some way – every one, that is, except the conception of Jesus. He who was the Unique One – the one of a kind – who came directly by the action of God. His conception was the mysterious intrusion of sheer spirit into common flesh, immaterial fused with material, infinity unwinding inside the finite. It was a fitting way for God to become a human creature.

I think it's significant that the two Gospels that narrate that events of the birth of Jesus – Matthew and Luke – both describe Mary as a virgin. It's as if God were saying, I promised long ago that I would rescue you. I gave my word, my oath. It was a very personal promise. And I fulfilled it myself.

As today's Advent Reading makes clear: that which was supposed to happen, happened: But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father, God sent his Son, born among us of a woman,

## Heart Prayer for this day:

*Jesus, you are the Soul-Enchanter.*

*Mesmerize me, so that I fix my eyes on you.*

*Enthrall me, so that I cannot wander far.*

*Spellbind me, so that I give you attention.*

*Enchant me, so that my soul's eyes see clearly.*

# Wis for Wake

Advent Reading: Ephesians 5:14-16 Wake up, sleeper

## Personal Reflections:

When we attend a wake for a friend or family member, we are acknowledging that the person in whose memory the wake is held has transitioned from one reality to another. In this way, we look both backward and forward in terms of time. Advent serves the same purpose. It focuses our attention for these four weeks on what has come before and what is to come ahead.

I love when we imagine that coming moment that is itself very nearly unimaginable: the moment in which God completely restores his creation. I suspect that its reality will turn out to be far beyond our wildest dreams, but it is comforting and exciting to imagine it.

One of my favorite imaginations is at the conclusion of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It's the scene in which Aslan breathed on the loyal Narnian creatures that had been turned to stone by the Wicked Witch. Aslan's very breath restored life to each one. Here's an excerpt:

"Hush," said Susan, "Aslan's doing something."

He was indeed. He had bounded up to the stone lion and breathed on him. Then without waiting a moment he whisked round—almost as if he had been a cat chasing its tail—and breathed also on the stone dwarf, which (as you remember) was standing a few feet from the lion with his back to it. Then he pounced on a tall stone dryad which stood beyond the dwarf, turned rapidly aside to deal with a stone rabbit on his right, and rushed on to two centaurs. But at that moment Lucy said,

"Oh, Susan! Look! Look at the lion."

I expect you've seen someone put a lighted match to a bit of newspaper which is propped up in a grate against an unlit fire. And for a second nothing seems to have happened; and then you notice a tiny streak of flame creeping along the edge of the newspaper. It was like that now. For a second after Aslan had breathed upon him the stone lion looked just the same. Then a tiny streak of gold began to run along his white marble back—then it spread—then the color seemed to lick all over him as the flame licks all over a bit of paper—

then, while his hindquarters were still obviously stone, the lion shook his mane and all the heavy, stone folds rippled into living hair. Then he opened a great red mouth, warm and living, and gave a prodigious yawn. And now his hind legs had come to life. He lifted one of them and scratched himself. Then, having caught sight of Aslan, he went bounding after him and frisking round him whimpering with delight and jumping up to lick his face.

## Heart Prayer for this day:

Jesus, you are the very Breath of God.

Just as I live by  
breathing in and out,  
in and out, I will  
live in the coming  
day by your breath  
of kindness and  
restoration.

Please, I ask you, keep me awake in this present time to this coming reality.





# X is for Christ

Advent Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:2-4 the little letter that stands for Christ

## Personal Reflections:

Wait a minute! How can the letter X stand for Christ?

In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word Christ begins with the letter X (pronounced chi). Here's what Christ looks like in Greek:

Χριστός

Within a century of Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers had popularized the use of X as a shorthand for the name of Christ by adopting the symbol of a fish as a code-word for their faith. Why the fish symbol? The word "fish" in Greek (ἰχθύς- pronounced ichthus) was an acrostic formed by the initial letters of each word in the phrase "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." The fish image became the universal symbol of the faith, a fitting symbol in that it reminds us of many stories in the Gospels. By the end of the 2nd century, Tertullian described those who were being baptized as, "Little fishes, after the image of our Fish, born in water."

The fish symbol was the secret code that protected Jesus' followers during the continual persecution that marked the first three centuries. It was a secure password for safely identifying themselves to each other. It was scratched on walls or rocks to point the way to gatherings. And the fish symbol can be seen today in the Roman catacombs, which were subterranean passageways that were used as burial sites. It was here in the catacombs that Jesus' followers could bury their loved ones and adorn the grave with Christian symbols and artwork as an expression of faith even in the face of death.

In effect, the letter X can be described as "the little letter that stands for Christ." And so are we. In today's Advent Reading, the apostle Paul makes use of this analogy: you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us. You weren't written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You weren't written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

## Heart Prayer for this day:

*Jesus, you are the one Constant in the universe,  
always yourself, always authentic,  
and always gripping me in love.*

*And because you are always constant, I know I'm safe.*

<sup>2</sup>Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men:

<sup>3</sup>Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

<sup>4</sup>And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward:

*2 Corinthians 3:2-4*



# Y is for Yes

Advent Reading: Luke 2:40-52 Mary loses her son

## Personal reflections:

The Advent Readings have been packed with people who said yes:

- Joseph said yes even when it meant embarrassment and humiliation that his betrothed would bear a child that wasn't his.
- Mary said yes even though it meant shame and ridicule. How could she have done that to Joseph? the village tongues wagged.
- The shepherds said yes even when it meant leaving their guard post.
- The magi said yes to a wearying walk to a foreign country that would not be welcoming.

Each "yes" was a real choice. It's as if God is the great Author of a play containing scenes that are to go a certain way, but he has not scripted the scenes, preferring to trust the actors to bring each scene to life.

And each "Yes" was not singular, but required repeated, reinforcing Yeses. When the desert was freezing at night and the insistent star unwaveringly led westward, surely the magi looked at each other and nodded, Yes, let's keep going.

Even his mother Mary had to repeat her monumental Yes. Today's Advent Reading presents a scene twelve years after the events of Jesus' birth, at which time Mary and Joseph had settled into a normal family life in Nazareth. But normalcy was turned upside down by their son's unheard-of behavior during an annual religious obligation. Mary was reminded that her special son was indeed special, perhaps unimaginable so, and she had to build up a treasury of Yeses in preparation for what was to come.

We, too, must steel ourselves to follow these examples. The surety and efficacy of God's grace co-exist with our agency. Every moment of every day, this persistent God asks us to assent to his presence and is shaping of our soul. It is a supreme gift and an immense obligation.

## Heart Prayer for this day:

O Lord my God,

tell me what you are to me.

say to my soul,

I am your salvation.

Say it so I can hear it.

My heart is listening, Lord;

Open the ears of my heart

and say to my soul,

I am your salvation.

Let me run toward this voice

and seize hold of you.

*Augustine*



# Z is for Zeal

Advent reading: Psalm 121 the God whose attention never wavers

## Personal reflections:

I confess to shivering whenever I hear the words “zeal” or “zealous,” both of which people use mainly as self-congratulations or a compliment. I shiver because I’ve seen zeal inflict deep wounds, perhaps wounds that never fully heal. And I’m ashamed that my own zeal has at times misdirected me toward prideful maltreatment of others.

I’m learning that “zeal” is one of those words in the Christian language that has moved far away from its referent. I’ve come to think that it’s better to understand zeal as “attention,” in that attention is a natural outworking of love. The poet J.D. McClatchy captured this notion perfectly: “Love is the quality of attention we pay to things.” Attention, like love, is not easy. It requires intentionality, commitment, and fierce real-time choices.

Ah, that’s it! We are never outside God’s attention. That’s why today’s Advent reading nearly shouts at the end: the zeal of the Lord will accomplish this! Accomplish what? The disruption of the old world and the inexorable restoration of creation through the Son. I will give my full attention, my full commitment, my full energy toward your rescue, God says.

We are never outside God’s attention. Neither the lost sheep nor lost coin nor lost son that Jesus described in Luke 15 were ever outside the attention of the one who loved them. You are the treasures of the Father and me, Jesus said in John 10, and no one will take you from our hand. It’s his attention that keeps us in his hand, making us forever safe.

God gives us his attention even when we’re unaware of it and even when we don’t want it. It’s his attention that grounds us, and I suspect we would cease to exist were his attention to stray from us. This insight of considering zeal to be attention causes me to recalibrate a great many things about how I think about and treat others, particularly those within arm’s reach or the sound of my voice.

## Heart Prayer for this day:

Jesus, you are the God of Attention,

Whether it’s dawn or noontide or sunset or moonrise or midnight,  
your attention never wavers.

The runaway sheep thought it had run away, but your attention was on it all the way.

The dropped coin feared it would not be found, but your attention swept it back.

The aching prodigal feared his father’s wrath, but your love restored him.

You always have your eye on me, too.

It’s what keeps me safe.

**<sup>1</sup> I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.**

**<sup>2</sup> My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.**

**<sup>3</sup> He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.**

**<sup>4</sup> Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.**

**<sup>5</sup> The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.**

**<sup>6</sup> The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.**

**<sup>7</sup> The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.**

**<sup>8</sup> The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.**

*Psalm 121*

# Christmas Eve

Advent reading: Revelation 5:1-14 the Lion who is the Lamb

## Personal reflections:

Christmas Eve is the one day of the year in which language is nearly inadequate to express our sensibilities. With joy and wonder spilling its normal boundaries, we turn toward bells and carols and glad faces of family and neighbors. Such things translate directly into our soul without need of mediation by words. Even our alphabet bows down on Christmas Day.

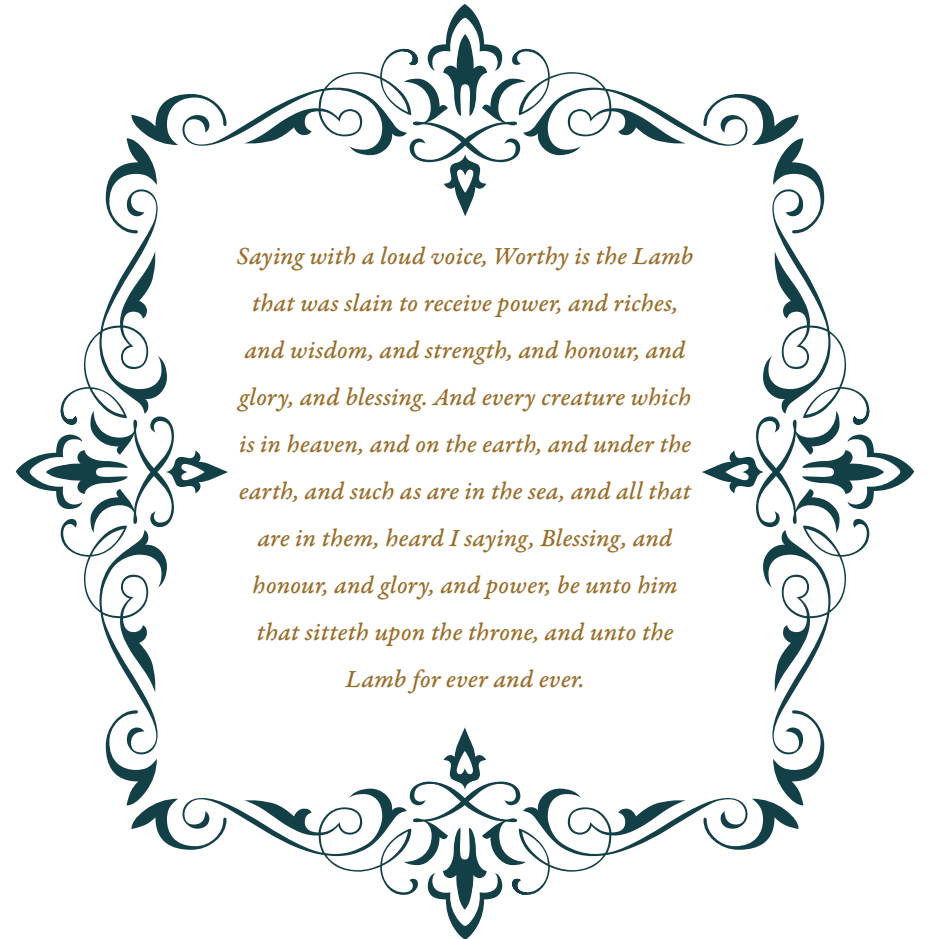
It's a day in which we sense in the deepest places of our soul that God wields grace as if it were free. If we are quiet and still, we can hear Jesus whispering to us:

When My kind Father, kinder than the sun,  
With looks and smiles bends down  
And utters My bodily life,  
My flesh, obeying, praises Heaven like a smiling cloud...  
And I will come and be your noon-day sun,  
And make your shadows palaces of moving light:  
And you will show Me your flowers.  
Thomas Merton The Holy Child's Song

## Heart Prayer for this day:

*Jesus, you are God-Come-Near,  
not with thunderbolts or fanfare,  
but really among us, born a babe  
as all of us began.*

*The Babe who makes all things well.*



Revelations 5:12-13



A B C D

E F G H

I J K L M

N O P Q

R S T U V

W X Y Z

“I am the Alpha and the Omega”