

Advent's Final Week: A Private Prayer Retreat

December 17-23, 2020

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Last April I wrote to you that the concurrence of Lent with the global pandemic was remarkable, and here we are—many months later—in the season of Advent and once again at high transmission alert during this viral pandemic. Even more remarkable—and grueling! Lent and Advent are the two extended seasons of self-reflection and penitence on the Church’s calendar. During Lent we remember God’s salvific work through Jesus’ death and resurrection. During Advent we remember the miracle of God coming to us in human form, and we long for the time when we will again have that face-to-face intimacy with God. Meanwhile, we look for God’s presence in our everyday lives and hope ourselves to incarnate holy love, truth, and grace in this aching world. How much more that seems called for during the 2020 Advent season when people are falling ill and are dying, livelihoods are in jeopardy, and political tensions roil us all.

Given the season and the circumstances, we at New College Berkeley offer you this private prayer retreat for the final days of Advent, as we trust that the Light shines in the darkness and is not overcome. We offer hymns, images, poetry, Scripture, and the ancient “O Antiphons” to infuse your prayers. Take time each day to use this guide as a springboard for your communion with God. Feel free to share the retreat, too.

We in the community of New College Berkeley send you our wishes for God’s blessings and assurance of love in this fourth week of Advent.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan S. Phillips". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small flourish at the end.

The O Antiphons

The last seven days of Advent, before the feasts of Christmas Eve and Christmas, have been celebrated in evening Vespers services through the centuries (perhaps since the 6th c.) by the singing of the “O Antiphons,” also known as the “Magnificent Antiphons.” Each antiphon is in direct address to Christ, drawing on names given to the Messiah in the Book of Isaiah. The vocative “O” is like saying, “Hail!” or “Greetings!” and its plaintive sound expresses longing.



During this week every year, the O Antiphons are spoken in conjunction with the “Magnificat,” the prayer Jesus’ mother Mary spoke in response to her cousin Elizabeth’s recognition of Divine life within her (Luke 1: 46-55). Mary said:

*My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;
For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;
Because He who is mighty has done great things for me,*

*and holy is His name;
And His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear Him.
He has shown might with His arm,
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and has exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.
He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of His mercy
Even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever.*

Listen to an English version of the Magnificat (the first lines, arranged by Randy Gill, performed by The Zoe Group): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhcOli9a7rg>

The Magnificat is chanted during these 7 last evenings of Advent and is joined by the O Antiphons. The Magnificat is one of the most frequently spoken prayers in the Christian tradition, being part of every Evensong service. On rare occasions it has been struck from the evening services of the church when oppressive regimes have felt it might empower the people and lead to protest, as happened for a period of time in India under the British Empire.

December 17



He is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom. (Isaiah 28:29)

O Wisdom (O Antiphon 1)

“O wisdom, coming forth from the Most High, filling all creation and reigning to the ends of the earth; come and teach us the way of truth.”

*O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti,
attingens a fine usque ad finem,
fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia:
veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

Listen to the first Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ngcQDQfh1A>

Poem

Advent Credo by Allan Boesak

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—
This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

Hymn

Be Thou My Vision (Traditional Irish hymn, possibly 8th c.)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Thou my soul's shelter, and thou my high tower;
Raise thou me heavenward, O power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O ruler of all.

Listen to the hymn here (performed by Audrey Assad):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Optrm7lF16s>

Invitation

Ponder how you invite Jesus Christ to be with you. Perhaps you say, "O," and give the Holy One a name. Then offer your prayer. You may want to write it and see how this naming of God and your prayer are sustained or transformed during this week.

December 18



For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler, the Lord is our king; he will save us. (Isaiah 33:22)

O Lord (O Antiphon 2)

“O Lord above and ruler of the house of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the flaming bush,
who gave the Law to him on Mt. Sinai
Come and save us with your strong arm’s reach.”

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

Listen to the second Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dn1cloz0ssQ>

Poem

Christmas by John Betjeman

The bells of waiting Advent ring,
The Tortoise stove is lit again
And lamp-oil light across the night
Has caught the streaks of winter rain
In many a stained-glass window sheen
From Crimson Lake to Hookers Green.

The holly in the windy hedge
And round the Manor House the yew
Will soon be stripped to deck the ledge,
The altar, font and arch and pew,
So that the villagers can say
'The church looks nice' on Christmas Day.

Provincial Public Houses blaze,
Corporation tramcars clang,
On lighted tenements I gaze,
Where paper decorations hang,
And bunting in the red Town Hall
Says 'Merry Christmas to you all'.

And London shops on Christmas Eve
Are strung with silver bells and flowers
As hurrying clerks the City leave
To pigeon-haunted classic towers,
And marbled clouds go scudding by
The many-steeped London sky.

And girls in slacks remember Dad,
And oafish louts remember Mum,
And sleepless children's hearts are glad.
And Christmas-morning bells say 'Come!'
Even to shining ones who dwell
Safe in the Dorchester Hotel.

And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A Baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissued fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,
No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare —
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

Hymn

How Great Thou Art (19th c.)

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed

[Refrain]

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

When through the woods, and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees
When I look down, from lofty mountain grandeur
And see the brook, and feel the gentle breeze

[Refrain]

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in

That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin.

Listen to the hymn here (performed by Mahalia Jackson):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byRXcyZn7YE>

Invitation

Advent is a season of preparation for Christ's arrival. It's a speedbump in the Christian year when we're to slow down and orient toward the mystery of the Lord of the Universe taking human form. What helps you slow down and look up?

December 19



A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1)

O Root of Jesse (Antiphon 3)

“O Root of Jesse’s,
Who stands as sign to the peoples
in whose presence rulers close their mouths
to whom the Gentiles send their prayers
come to set us free, hurry.”

*O Radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum,
super quem continebunt reges os suum,
quem Gentes deprecabuntur:
veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare.*

Listen to the third Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFE7B-DZ8_w

Poems

(Three short poems about Mary who was rooted in solitary, awesome destiny)

Prophecy by Luci Shaw

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. (Isaiah 11:1)

What is it
about the urgent
bud of green
poking from
this ancient tree's
rough stump
that reminds me of
the human improbability
of young Mary
giving birth?

The Stable by Sr. M. Chrysostom, O.S.B.

The winds were scornful,
Passing by;
And gathering Angels
Wondered why
A burdened Mother
Did not mind
That only animals
Were kind.
For who in all the world
Could guess
That God would search out
Loneliness.

mary's dream by Lucille Clifton

winged women was saying
"full of grace" and like.
was light beyond sun and words
of a name and a blessing.
winged women to only i.
i joined them, whispering
yes.

Hymn

Mary, Did You Know? (Buddy Greene and Mark Lowry)

Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you

Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
When you kiss your little baby, you kiss the face of God

Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?
That sleeping child you're holding is the great I am

Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know?
Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Mary did you know? Oh
Mary did you know?

Listen to the hymn here (by Pentatonix):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifCWN5pJGIE>

Invitation

God searches out loneliness. God finds us where we are. Even in the darkness, the Light shines. And that Light is the “great I am,” come through the root of Jesse into our lives today. We are branches on that tree—rooted and yet, in so many ways, solitary. Take some time to pray with this imagery of light, roots, and branches growing, reaching, pervading the world and tethering you to God. Are you able to whisper “yes?”

Perhaps you might draw what comes to you in prayer.

December 20



I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. (Isaiah 22:22)

O Key of David (Antiphon 4)

“O Key of David,
and scepter of the house of Israel,
you open and no one closes,
you close and no one opens

“Come and lead us who sit bound with chains in the prison house,
sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.”

*O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel;
qui aperis, et nemo claudit;
claudis, et nemo aperit:
veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris,
sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

Listen to the fourth Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDg29sswhgQ>

Poem

O Clavis by Malcolm Guite

Even in the darkness where I sit
And huddle in the midst of misery
I can remember freedom, but forget
That every lock must answer to a key,
That each dark clasp, sharp and intricate,
Must find a counter-clasp to meet its guard,
Particular, exact and intimate,
The clutch and catch that meshes with its ward.
I cry out for the key I threw away
That turned and over turned with certain touch
And with the lovely lifting of a latch
Opened my darkness to the light of day.
O come again, come quickly, set me free
Cut to the quick to fit, the master key.

Hymn

Amazing Grace by John Newton

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my Shield and Portion be,
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

Listen to the hymn here (by a flash mob in the Netherlands):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKd7yIMqWeE>

Invitation

We have been quarantined and sheltering-in-place for much of the year. Many people have suffered bereavement, illness, and economic hardship, and many of us have been awakening to our own hard-heartedness and prejudice as we undergo the stress of social and political turmoil. We are reminded that Jesus Christ is the key to the chains which bind us.

Imagine what binds and imprisons you, personally and culturally. Perhaps you are moved to confession or lament. Imagine Jesus coming to you, finding you, releasing you, and inviting you into the circle around him.

December 21



*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9:2)*

O Dayspring (Antiphon 5)

*“O Dayspring
splendor of light and sun of justice:
Come and bring light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”*

*O Oriens,
splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae:
veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

Listen to the fifth Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BsZH7e27Dg>

You alone bring us hope,
Healing and strength, mercy and light.

Come, Lord Jesus Christ.
Be with us now. Come and renew us.
Come, oh, Prince of Peace.
Dwell in our hearts. Come, be our way, our truth, and life.
Conquer the night.
Come, be our light, Emmanuel.

III

Save us, Emmanuel
Be our God with us now
Grant us goodness and grace,
Justice and peace, fullness of life. Be with us now.
Dwell in our hearts.
Conquer the night.
Come, be our light.

Listen to the hymn here (performed by the Bukas Palad Music Ministry and people on the frontlines of the pandemic): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLQUjza_lkU

Invitation

Today is not Epiphany (which comes on January 6), but it is the winter solstice, the longest night of year and the pivot point at which daytime begins to lengthen. We all catch glimpses of God with us in our daily lives, and Advent is a reminder that the Light is present. It might be a sunrise, a letter in the mail, a voice on the other end of the phone, a word of Scripture or poetry which signals to you that “God is here.” Look back over your day and remember where you felt that affirmation.

December 22



For a child has been born for us, a son given us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

O King (Antiphon 6)

“O Leader of many peoples,
O Leader desired by many peoples
O Corner Stone who holds such different peoples together
Come and save us human beings whom you formed out of the earth’s clay.”

*O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum,
lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum:
veni, et salva hominem,
quem de limo formasti.*

Listen to the sixth Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GvDvgfLoUo>

Poem

From God Christ's Deity Came Forth by Ephrem of Edessa (4th century; translated by John Howard Rhys, adapted and altered by F Bland Tucker, (Episcopal) Hymnbook 1982)

From God Christ's deity came forth,
his manhood from humanity;
his priesthood from Melchizedek,
his royalty from David's tree:
praised be his Oneness.

He joined with guests at wedding feast,
yet in the wilderness did fast;
he taught within the temple's gates;
his people saw him die at last:
praised be his teaching.

The dissolute he did not scorn,
nor turn from those who were in sin;
he for the righteous did rejoice
but bade the fallen to come in:
praised be his mercy.

He did not disregard the sick;
to simple ones his word was given;
and he descended to the earth
and, his work done, went up to heaven:
praised be his coming.

Who then, my Lord, compares to you?
The Watcher slept, the Great was small,
the Pure baptized, the Life who died,
the King abased to honor all:
praised be your glory.

Hymn

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus by Charles Wesley (1744)

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,

Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

Listen to the hymn here (performed by Fernando Ortega):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dmO8UPIWoo>

Invitation

In the midst of thinking about the baby Jesus and the earthy truth of incarnation, we can lose awareness of Christ's majesty. Our culture is so democratic and individualistic that we recoil from "Christ the King" in favor of the "friend we have in Jesus." Yet, the image of Christ as king is deeply embedded in Scripture. We know (from Samuel) that kings were not God's first choice for religious leaders, but, like all imagery for God (father, shepherd, mother, bridegroom...), it is a single lens through which to see the One who is so much more than the particular image, the One Who is Holy.

Notice any resistance you experience when you encounter Wesley's words inviting God to reign over us and rule in our hearts. Return to the Antiphon and the way it mingles the imagery of a king and a gentle potter. Then reflect on how you invite God to govern your heart and life.

December 23



Nativity by Sadao Watanabe

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

O Emmanuel (Antiphon 7)

*“O Emmanuel! ruler and giver of our laws,
Hope of the people from across the whole world,
Come to save us
O Lord our God.”*

*O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster,
exspectatio Gentium, et Salvator earum:
veni ad salvandum nos, Domine, Deus noster.*

Listen to the seventh Antiphon sung in Gregorian Chant:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdu0HjiLEn4>

Poem

The Work of Christmas Begins by Howard Thurman (adapted)

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart...

And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.
Then the work of Christmas begins.

Hymn

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (12th c.)

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, thou Wisdom from on high,
who orderest all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go. *Refrain*

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free
thine own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell thy people save,
and give them victory over the grave. *Refrain*

O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight. *Refrain*

O come, thou Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery. *Refrain*

O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times once gave the law
in cloud and majesty and awe. *Refrain*

O come, thou Root of Jesse's tree,
an ensign of thy people be;
before thee rulers silent fall;
all peoples on thy mercy call. *Refrain*

O come, Desire of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind;
bid thou our sad divisions cease,
and be thyself our King of Peace. *Refrain*

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear. *Refrain*

Listen to the hymn here (performed by For King and Country):
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=draHA_9MS18

Invitation

We receive Emmanuel, God with us, and we participate in the work of Christmas, as Thurman writes. Though we ourselves may be mourning “in lonely exile here,” especially during the pandemic, we hope to participate in caring for the lonely, the hungry, the exiled, and all the people suffering in our midst. Sometimes the best we can do is stand beside them in the darkness, allow our night vision to grow, gradually notice the faint light, and point to it.

Write your own “O Antiphon.”

Receive this Benediction

O people of hope and faith
allow the One who comes to you to live in your heart.
O friends of Christ the Light
allow God’s grace to flow through you to the people you meet
 recognize their belovedness
 listen to their stories
 pray for the world.
O people of love
allow yourselves to be saturated by Love.
Amen

