

# LIFE IS ADVENT

THE LORD IS ALWAYS NEAR



HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

## INTRODUCTION

It is Advent again. Time to attune ourselves to the deeper rhythms of our liturgical year as we focus on the coming of Christ more fully into our daily lives. But amidst our hectic activities and holiday stresses, we can often be so overwhelmed and distracted that we cannot focus on God's presence within ourselves, in those around us or in our daily activities. This is where Fr. Henri Nouwen (1932-1996), one of the most down-to-earth spiritual writers of the twentieth century, can help us. In this collection of daily reflections and prayers he encourages us to recognize Christ's coming into our lives so we will be better able to celebrate Jesus as our Emmanuel—God-with-us—at Christmas. As Nouwen himself writes so eloquently:

I have made an inner decision to keep looking at Jesus as the one who calls us to the heart of God, a heart that knows only love...I hope and pray that you who read these meditations will discover many connections with your own spiritual journey, even when that journey is very different from my own. I trust that these connections will make you aware that we are traveling together toward the Light, always encouraging each other to keep our eyes fixed on the One who is calling us home...Be alert, be alert, so that you will be able to recognize your Lord in your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your friends, your teachers, but also in all that you read in the daily papers. The Lord is coming, always coming. Be alert to his coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.

—Steve Mueller  
Editor

## ADVENT EXPECTATION

*“Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may spring up.” (Isaiah 45:8)*

Today opens the Advent season. A large green wreath with four candles, symbolizing the four Sundays before Christmas, was hung in the center of the choir. This simple decoration in the otherwise so sober chapel touched me deeply. Four weeks of expectation have begun. It is good, very good, to have these weeks of expectations and to deepen my realization that all these small expectations help me come to a deeper awareness of the great day on which the Lord will return to fulfill his promises.

The first Sunday of Advent liturgy makes me constantly aware of the great expectation of the Advent season. I find myself singing a cherished Advent verse welling up from my innermost being: “You heavens send down your dew and let the clouds rain down the Just One.” And the response: “Let the earth be opened and bring forth the Savior.”

The strong supplicating melody of this Advent hymn reverberates in me, and helps to bring up the gentle image of a divine dew covering the earth. God’s grace is indeed like a gentle morning dew and a soft rain that gives new life to barren soil. I am called in Advent “to bring forth the Savior,” to become more and more sensitive to the morning dew and to open my soul to the rain so that my inner self can bring forth the Savior.

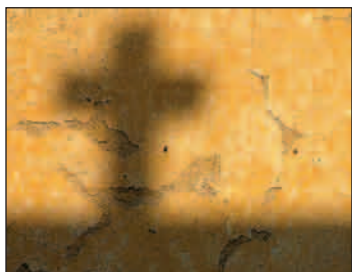


*Jesus, help me to open myself to your life-giving, nourishing presence this Advent. Today I will...*

## HE WHO IS TO COME

*“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:20)*

The expectation of Advent is anchored in the event of God’s incarnation. The more I come in touch with what happened in the past, the more I come in touch with what is to come. The Gospel not only reminds me of what took place but also of what will take place. In the contemplation of Christ’s first coming, I can discover the signs of his second coming. By looking back in meditation, I can look forward in expectation. By reflection, I can project; by conserving the memory of Christ’s birth, I can progress to the fulfillment of his kingdom.



What strikes me is that waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting. As the Advent weeks progress, we hear more and more about the beauty and splendor of the One who is to come.

I am struck by the fact that the prophets speaking about the future of Israel always kept reminding their people of God’s great works in the past. They could look forward with confidence because they could look backward with awe to Yahweh’s great deeds.

I pray that Advent will offer me the opportunity to deepen my memory of God’s great deeds in time and will set me free to look forward with courage to the fulfillment of time by him who came and is still to come.

*Jesus, help me to learn about your desire to come to me this Advent. Today I will...*

TUESDAY, WEEK 1

## EYES TO SEE

*“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! Many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it.” (Luke 10:23-4)*

The spiritual knowledge that we belong to God and are safe with God even as we live in a very destructive world allows us to see in the midst of all the turmoil, fear, and agony of history “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27). Even though Jesus speaks about this as about a final event, it is not just one more thing that is going to happen after all the terrible things are over. Just as the end time is already here, so too is the coming of the Son of Man. It is an event in the realm of the Spirit and thus not subject to the boundaries of time.

Those who live in communion with Jesus have the eyes to see and the ears to hear the second coming of Jesus among them in the here and now. Jesus says, “Before this generation has passed away all will have taken place” (Luke 21:32). And this is true for each faithful generation.

As long as there are strangers, hungry, naked, and sick people; prisoners, refugees, and slaves, people who are handicapped physically, mentally, or emotionally, people without work, a home, or a piece of land, there will be that haunting question from the throne of judgment: “What have you done for the least of mine?” The question makes the coming of Christ an ever-present event.

*Jesus, open my eyes to notice your presence all around me. Today I will...*

## AWAKENING TO GOD WITHIN US

*“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.”*

*(Romans 13:11)*

The practice of contemplative prayer is the discipline by which we begin to see God in our heart. It is a careful attentiveness to him who dwells in the center of our being such that through the recognition of his presence we allow him to take possession of all our senses.

Through the discipline of prayer we awaken ourselves to the God in us and let him enter into our heartbeat and our breathing, into our thoughts and emotions, our hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting. It is by being awake to this God in us that we can see him in the world around us. The great mystery of the contemplative life is



not that we see God in the world, but that God within us recognizes God in the world. God speaks to God, Spirit speaks to Spirit, heart speaks to heart.

Contemplation, therefore, is a participation in this divine self-recognition. It is the divine Spirit praying in us who makes our world transparent and opens our eyes to the presence of the divine Spirit in all that surrounds us. It is with our heart of hearts that we see the heart of the world. This explains the intimate relationship between contemplation and ministry.

*Jesus, speak to my heart so that I may know your presence within me always.  
Today I will...*

## THE HIDDEN REALITY OF GOD

*“This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”*

*(John 6:40)*

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, much in our fleeting lives is not passing but lasting, not dying but coming to life, not temporary but eternal. Amid the fragility of our lives, we have wonderful reason to hope.

Some call this hidden reality “grace,” others “God’s life in us,” others still “the kingdom of God among us.” Whatever the name you give, once you focus your eyes and ears on the precious center you start to realize that all the torrents of time and circumstance that roll over it serve only to polish it into a precious, imperishable gift. Anyone who believes, Jesus reminds us, has eternal life. That is the enormous revolution, that in this fleeting, temporary world he comes to plant the seed of eternal life. In many ways that is what is meant by the term *the spiritual life*—the nurturing of the eternal amid the temporal, the lasting within the passing, God’s presence in the human family. It is the life of the divine Spirit within us.

Become aware of this mysterious presence and life turns around. You sense joy even as others nurse complaints, you experience peace while the world conspires in war, and you find hope even when headlines broadcast despair. You discover a deep love even while the air around you seems pervaded by hatred.

*Jesus, transform me by your presence and help me turn my life around.  
Today I will...*

FRIDAY, WEEK 1

## JESUS IS CLOSE BY

*“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

*(Matthew 28:20)*

**Y**ou wonder what to do when you feel attacked on all sides by seemingly irresistible forces, waves that cover you and want to sweep you off your feet. Sometimes these waves consist of feeling rejected, feeling forgotten, feeling misunderstood. Sometimes they consist of anger, resentment, or even the desire for revenge, and sometimes of self-pity and self-rejection. These waves make you feel like a powerless child abandoned by your parents.

What are you to do? Make the conscious choice to move the attention of your anxious heart away from these waves and direct it to the One who walks on them and says, “It’s me. Don’t be afraid” (Matthew 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20). Keep turning your eyes to



him and go on trusting that he will bring peace to your heart. Look at him and say, “Lord, have mercy.” Say it again and again, not anxiously but with confidence that he is very close to you and will put your soul to rest.

Be patient. When you feel lonely, stay with your loneliness. Avoid the temptation to let your fearful self run off. Let it teach you its wisdom; let it tell you that you can live instead of just surviving. Gradually you will become one, and you will find that Jesus is living in your heart and offering you all you need.

*Jesus, do not abandon me but draw me ever closer to yourself and to God.  
Today I will...*



SATURDAY, WEEK I

## SOMETHING IS HAPPENING WITHIN ME

*“When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.”*

*(Jeremiah 29:12)*

The simple fact of being for one hour in the presence of the Lord and of showing him all that I feel, think, sense, and experience, without trying to hide anything, must please him. Somehow, somewhere, I know that he loves me, even though I do not feel that love as I can feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile as I can see a human face. Still the Lord speaks to me, looks at me, and embraces me there, where I am still unable to notice it.

The only way I become aware of his presence is in that remarkable desire to return to that quiet chapel and be there without any real satisfaction. Yes, I notice, maybe only retrospectively, that my days and weeks are different days and weeks when they are held together by these regular “useless” times.

God is greater than my senses, greater than my thoughts, greater than my heart. I do believe that he touches me in places that are unknown even to myself. I seldom can point directly to these places; but when I feel this inner pull to return again to that hidden hour of prayer, I realize that something is happening that is so deep that it becomes like the riverbed through which the waters can safely flow and find their way to the open sea.

*Jesus, work in me and draw me more deeply into my relationship with you.  
Today I will...*

## OUR HIDDEN LIFE

*“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

*(Colossians 3:2-3)*

**I**n our time with such an emphasis on visibility, the hidden life of Jesus is of special importance for a deeper understanding of our lives in the Spirit. The hidden life of Jesus reveals to us the hidden presence of God. God who is the most different one, the most distinct one, the most “other,” became the most hidden one, the one who is most the same.

The experience of being the same, of being one with others, of being truly part of humanity, is a profoundly joyful and freeing experience. We are hidden in creation, hidden among our fellow human beings. That is the basis of true humility. We are to live close to the ground of our humanity. We are dust returning to dust. This humility is not self-rejecting, but self-affirming, since it offers a deeper sense of our embeddedness.

Everything that Jesus says and does during his public life needs to be heard and seen as coming from the one whose life is first and foremost a life hidden among us. Jesus’ death then becomes the full living out of this hiddenness. He lives his life out in such an intimate solidarity with us that we can say that he is more fully alive than any other human being. It is through this human “sameness” that we can come to share in his divine life.

*Jesus, stay hidden no longer but reveal yourself to me in my daily life.  
Today I will...*

## BE WITH ME, JESUS!

*“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)*

There, Lord, is the mystery of your love. I have not seen you and yet I truly see you every time I look at the broken bodies of my fellow human beings. I have not heard you, and yet I truly hear you every time I hear the cries uttered by men, women and children in pain. I have not touched you, and yet I truly touch you every time I touch all those who come to me in their loneliness. In the midst of all the human brokenness and human pain, I see, hear and touch the heart of humanity, your humanity, the humanity of all the people embraced by your love.

Thank you, Jesus, for your heart. Thank you for showing me your heart. Thank you for letting me see while not seeing, hear while not hearing, touch while not touching. Thank you for letting me believe more every day, hope more every day and love more every day.

My heart is little, fearful and very timid. It will always be so. But you say, “Come to my heart. My heart is gentle and humble and very broken like yours. Do not be afraid. Come and let your heart find rest in mine and trust that all will be well.” I want to come, Jesus, and be with you. Here I am, Lord, take my heart and let it become a heart filled with your love.



*Jesus, help me continue to be alert to your presence in myself and others.  
Today I will...*

TUESDAY, WEEK 2

## SHOWING OUR LOVE

*“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jeremiah 31:3)*

Jesus came to tell us that we are the Beloved, not because we did anything, not because we proved ourselves. Basically, God loves us whatever we do. If that’s true, these few years that we are in the world, we are sent to say, in the midst of our life, “Yes, God, I love you, too.”

Just as God cares for us, it’s very important that we care for God in the world. If God is born like a little baby, God cannot walk or speak unless someone teaches God. That’s the story of Jesus, who needs human beings in order to grow. God is saying, “I want to be weak so you can love me. What better way to help you respond to my love than becoming weak so you can care for me?”

God becomes a stumbling God who falls at the cross, who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. God does this so that we can get close. The God who loves us is a God who becomes vulnerable, dependent in the manger and dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, “Are you there for me?”

*Jesus, I want to be there for you and to help you become more present in our world. Today I will...*



## MEETING JESUS CHANGES US

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)*

**Y**ou are looking for ways to meet Jesus. You are trying to meet him not only in your mind but also in your body. You seek his affection, which you know involves his body as well as yours. He became flesh for you so that you could encounter him in the flesh and receive his love in the flesh.

But something remains in you that prevents this meeting. There is still a lot of shame and guilt stuck away in your body, blocking the presence of Jesus. You do not fully feel at home in your body; you look down on it as if it were not a good enough, beautiful enough, or pure enough place to meet Jesus.

You will not be able to meet Jesus in your body while your body remains full of doubts and fears. Jesus came to free you from these bonds and to create in you a space where you can be with him. He wants you to live the freedom of the children of God.

Do not despair, thinking that you cannot change yourself after so many years. Simply enter into the presence of Jesus as you are and ask him to give you a fearless heart where he can be with you. Jesus came to give you a new heart, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new body. Let him transform you by his love and so enable you to receive his affection in your whole being.

*Jesus, help me accept my body as it is and let you love me as I am. Today I will...*

## BELONGING TO GOD

*“But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” (Romans 8:9)*

The God of whom Jesus speaks is a God of compassion who joyously welcomes repentant sinners into his house. To associate and eat with people of ill repute, therefore, does not contradict his teaching about God, but does, in fact, live out this teaching in everyday life. If God forgives the sinners, then certainly those who have faith in God should do the same. If God welcomes sinners home, then certainly those who trust in God should do likewise. If God is compassionate, then certainly those who love God should be compassionate as well. The God whom Jesus announces and in whose name he acts is the God of compassion, the God who offers himself as example and model for all human behavior.

But there is more. Becoming like the heavenly Father is not just one important aspect of Jesus’ teaching, it is the very heart of his message. The radical quality of Jesus’ words and the seeming impossibility of his demands are quite obvious when heard as part of a general call to become and to be true sons and daughters of God.

As long as we belong to this world, we will remain subject to its competitive ways and expect to be rewarded for all the good we do. But when we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as he does. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.

*Jesus, help me to love others without a lot of conditions as you love me. Today I will...*

## MARY, MODEL OF LIFE WITH JESUS

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)*

God chose to take flesh in the woman who had found favor in God’s eyes and had responded to that favor with a full “yes.” Her response was not only an initial agreement but a lifelong obedience to God’s redemptive presence. In this obedience she followed Jesus in the most perfect way. Her life was a life of always fuller abandonment to the divine will, a total emptying out in faith.

Thus Mary protects Christianity from becoming a system of ideas, doctrines, opinions, or convictions. She constantly keeps before us that most intimate relationship with her Son. Her complete obedience, radical humility, and unwavering faithfulness show us what a life of following Jesus truly can be. Following Jesus does not mean clinging to an idea or holding on to a principle. It is walking the path of the one who gave his life for his friends and called his followers to do the same.

Mary’s whole being is in the service of Jesus. She is totally Mother, totally given to letting Jesus be born into this world, not only long ago in Bethlehem, but today and always in the heart of anyone who wants to find God. Her whole being is for Jesus. Seeing Mary always means seeing the Mother of God. Knowing Mary always means knowing the one who gives life to God.



*Jesus, help me to make my relationship with you my highest priority. Today I will...*

SATURDAY, WEEK 2

## GOD IS CLOSE

*“Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)*

The Advent liturgy builds up the excitement and anticipatory joy about the coming of the Lord. But is this not a preparation that can only lead to an anticlimax? I don't think so.

Advent does not lead to nervous tension stemming from expectation of something spectacular about to happen. Rather, it leads to a growing inner stillness and joy allowing me to realize that the One for whom I am waiting has already arrived and speaks to me in the silence of my heart.

Just as a mother feels the child grow in her and is not surprised on the day of the birth but joyfully receives the one she learned to know during her waiting, so Jesus can be born in my life slowly and steadily and be received as the one I learned to know while waiting.

Calmness, repose, even-mindedness, restful joy, gentleness: these are the feelings that describe best my present life. I feel very much at ease and still, and neither noise nor words nor actions seem to disturb this stillness. It is a grace-filled time and God is close.

*Jesus, help me trust in the slow and steady growth of your life within me.  
Today I will...*





## REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS!

*“You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants.”*  
*(Isaiah 66:14)*

Today is “Gaudete” Sunday, the Sunday to rejoice. For the entrance song of the Eucharist we sang the words of St. Paul: “Rejoice, again I say rejoice. The Lord is very near.” This feast day gives Advent its true character. It is indeed primarily a season of joy. It is not, like Lent, primarily a time of penance. There is too much anticipation for that. All-overriding is the experience of joy.

We are joyful already now because we know that the Lord will come. Our expectation leads to joy and our joy to a desire to give to others. Real joy always wants to share. It belongs to the nature of joy to communicate itself to others and to invite others to take part in the gifts we have received.

Advent is indeed a time of joyful waiting and joyful giving. How much this mood is also part of our whole society. The period before Christmas has that remarkable quality of joy that seems to touch not only Christians but all who live in our society. When you, as a Westerner, live in another society, such as the Japanese society, where Advent and Christmas do not exist as universal events, you realize the lack of this joyful anticipation most painfully.

*Jesus, help me rejoice knowing that you are always coming more fully into our world. Today I will...*

## YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED CHILD

*“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” (Mark 1:11)*

That same heavenly voice was heard again by Peter, James, and John in the light of Mount Tabor: “This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favor. Listen to him” (Matt. 17:1-8). I am convinced that the voice from heaven was not speaking just to Jesus or about Jesus. The voice also is speaking to us and about us. We, too, have been anointed as the beloved sons and daughters of God. Jesus came to share his divine nature and identity with us, and to impart his Christhood. The Spirit of Jesus now helps us claim this deeper truth.



Just for a moment, in your prayer and meditation, try to enter this enormous mystery: that you, like Christ, are God's beloved child. In you, God is well pleased. Your belovedness precedes your birth. It will follow you all the days of your life and beyond death. You are fully

loved of God before your father and mother, brother, sister, family, or church loved you or didn't love you, hurt you or helped you. You are fully loved because you belong to God for all eternity. That's the truth of your identity. That's who you are. And you can reclaim it at any moment.

*Jesus, speak to me and I will listen and be changed. Today I will...*

## LIVING IN GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT

*“All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” (Romans 8:14, 16)*

In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our lives in the most intimate way, so that we could enter into his life through the Spirit. In Jesus, God became one of us to lead us through Jesus into the intimacy of his divine life. Jesus came to us to become as we are and left us to allow us to become as he is. By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves.

It is through this breath of God that we can call God “Abba, Father” and can become part of the mysterious divine relationship between Father and Son. Praying in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, therefore, means participating in the intimate life of God himself.

There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God’s breath. We are like asthmatic people who are cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia*, narrowness) and made everything new for us. We receive a new breath, a new freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God’s breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God’s inner life, and by which we are born anew.

*Jesus, breathe your Spirit into me so I may share your life more intimately. Today I will...*

## LIVING IN GOD'S LOVE

*“We love because God first loved us.” (1 John 4:18)*

When I want to know if I ever have come to the true knowledge of God's existence, I have simply to allow myself to become aware of how I experience myself. Indeed, what is central to me is: I exist. My own existence fills me, and wherever I turn I find myself again locked in my own self-awareness: I exist. My existence is what really counts.

However, as soon as I say, “God exists,” my existence no longer can remain in the center, because the essence of the knowledge of God reveals my own existence as deriving its total being from his. That is the true conversion experience. I no longer let the knowledge of my existence be the center from which I derive, project, deduct, or intuit the existence of God; I suddenly or slowly find my own existence revealed to me in and through the knowledge of God.

Then it becomes real for me that I can love myself and my neighbor only because God has loved me first. The life-converting experience is not the discovery that I have choices to make that determine the way I live out my existence, but the awareness that my existence itself is not in the center. Once I “know” God, that is, once I experience God's love as the love in which all my human experiences are anchored, I can desire only one thing: to be in that love.

*Jesus, help me make you the center of my life and not myself and my needs.  
Today I will...*



## JESUS IS WHERE YOU ARE

*“I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but God sent me.” (John 8:42)*

You find prayer quite easy. What a grace! People around you are going to the theater, ballet classes, or dinner parties, and you do not feel rejected or abandoned when they do not invite you to join them. In fact, you are very happy to be alone in your room. It is not hard to speak to Jesus and listen to him speaking to you. You are becoming aware of how close Jesus is to you. He holds you safe in his love. At times, memories of past events and fantasies about the future pierce your heart, but these painful incidents have become less frightening, less devastating, less paralyzing. It almost seems as if they are necessary reminders of your need to stay close—very close—to Jesus.

You know that something totally new, truly unique, is happening within you. It is clear that something in you is dying and something is being born. You must remain attentive, calm, and obedient to your best intuitions. You keep asking yourself, “What about the ways I have done and said things in the past? What about my many options in the future?” Suddenly you realize that these questions are no longer meaningful.

You feel a strange sadness. An enormous loneliness emerges, but you are not frightened. You feel vulnerable but safe at the same time. Jesus is where you are, and you can trust that he will show you the next step.

*Jesus, help me relish your presence and seek it even more through my prayer. Today I will...*

## DRAWING CLOSER TO GOD AND OTHERS

*“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16)*

One of the discoveries we make in prayer is that the closer we come to God, the closer we come to all our brothers and sisters in the human family. God is not a private God. The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is also the God who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being. As we recognize God’s presence in our own hearts, we can also recognize that presence in the hearts of others, because the God who has chosen us as a dwelling-place gives us the eyes to see



the God who dwells in others. When we see only demons within ourselves, we can see only demons in others, but when we see God within ourselves, we can see God also in others.

This might sound rather theoretical, but when we pray, we will increasingly experience ourselves as part of a human family infinitely bound by God who created us to share, all of us, in the divine light.

To pray, that is, to listen to the voice of the One who calls us the “beloved,” is to learn that that voice excludes no one. Where I dwell, God dwells with me and where God dwells with me I find all my sisters and brothers. And so intimacy with God and solidarity with all people are two aspects of dwelling in the present moment that can never be separated.

*Jesus, help me recognize your presence in others and respond joyfully.  
Today I will...*

## ALL WE NEED IS RIGHT HERE

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44)*

“**T**his evil generation asks for a sign,” Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke (11:29). But what we are looking for is right under our eyes. Somehow we don’t fully trust that our God is a God of the present and speaks to us where we are. “This is the day the Lord has made.” When the people of Nineveh heard Jonah speak, they turned back to God. Can we listen to the word that God speaks to us today and do the same? This is a very simple but crucial message: Don’t wait for tomorrow to change your heart. This is the favorable time!

The people sitting around the little table in my living room were very excited about this idea. Just being here together in the presence of God, listening to God’s Word, breaking bread together and drinking the cup—this is the moment of salvation; this is the moment of God’s appearance among us. All we need is right here.

One person, who hadn’t been to our Eucharist celebration before, was deeply moved by what the readings were telling her. She was struggling with her addiction to smoking and had been feeling miserable and depressed. She said, “I can’t believe this. Everything you all are talking about speaks directly to me. This is more than a coincidence. God must have called me to this place to hear this.”

*Jesus, help me change my heart right now and turn completely to you. Today I will...*

## ANTICIPATING CHRISTMAS JOY

*“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)*

During the last week of Advent it seems as if the liturgy can no longer hide the excitement about the coming of the Lord and bursts forth in anticipatory joy. During Vespers the “O” antiphons express unrestrained exhilaration. “O Wisdom that proceeds from the mouth of the Most High, O Adonai and leader of the House of Israel, O Root of Jesse who stands as the ensign of the peoples, O Key of David and Scepter of the House of Israel, O Orient, Splendor of eternal light, O King of nations, the One for whom they long, O Emmanuel, the Expectation and Savior of the nations—come to us, O Lord, Our God.” Every evening between December 17 and 24 a new “O” is sung and, slowly, waiting and welcoming, expecting and seeing, hoping and receiving, future and present merge into one song of praise to the Lord who has visited his people.

The Gospel passages read during Mass all talk about the events before Jesus’ birth and the people ready to receive him. In the other readings Isaiah heaps prophecy on prophecy to strengthen and deepen our hope, and the songs, lessons, commentaries, and antiphons all compete in their attempt to set the stage for the Lord who is to come. This last week is indeed a happy one.

*Jesus, help me share the excitement of your coming into our lives anew.  
Today I will...*





## THE WAY OF WEAKNESS

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”*  
*(2 Corinthians 12:9)*

The way of God is the way of weakness. The great news of the Gospel is precisely that God became small and vulnerable, and hence bore fruit among us. The most fruitful life ever lived is the life of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but became as we are.

Jesus brought us new life in ultimate vulnerability. He came to us as a small child, dependent on the care and protection of others. He lived for us as a poor preacher, without any political, economic, or military power. He died for us nailed on a cross as a useless criminal. It is in this extreme vulnerability that our salvation was won. The fruit of this poor and failing existence is eternal life for all who believe in him.

It is very hard for us to grasp even a little bit of the mystery of God’s vulnerability. Yet, when we have eyes to see and ears to hear we can see it in many ways and in many places. We can see it when a child is born, the fruit of the love of two people who came together without defenses and embraced each other in weakness. We can see it in the graceful smiles of poor people and in the warm affection of the handicapped. We can see it every time people ask forgiveness and are reconciled.

*Jesus, help me accept my vulnerability and weakness and let you give me strength. Today I will...*

TUESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

## HE EMPTIED HIMSELF

*“Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” (Philippians 2:6-7)*

The love of God becomes visible in Jesus in a descending way. That is the great mystery of the Incarnation. God has descended to us human beings to become a human being with us; and once among us, descended to the total dereliction of one condemned to death. It isn't easy really to feel and understand from the inside this descending way of Jesus. Every fiber of our being rebels against it. We don't mind paying attention to poor people from time to time; but descending to a state of poverty and becoming poor with the poor, that we don't want to do. And yet that is the way Jesus chose as the way to know God.

The descending direction on the ladder of life in very plain terms is the way of God's love. It is a way that goes down further and further into the greatest destitution: the destitution of a criminal whose life is taken from him. You may wonder, at this point, whether Jesus isn't a masochist in search of misery. The opposite is true. The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of peace and joy, not of self-disdain and self-torment. The descending way of Jesus is the way to a new fellowship in which we human beings can reach new life and celebrate it happily together.

*Jesus, help me discover the depths of your love in descending to be with us.  
Today I will...*

WEDNESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

## PEACE ON EARTH

*“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”  
(Romans 14:19)*

Do not give up working for peace. Always remember that the peace for which you work is not of this world. Do not let yourself be distracted by the great noises of war, the dramatic descriptions of misery, and the sensational expressions of human cruelty. The newspapers, movies, and war novels may make you numb, but they do not create in you a true desire for peace. They tend to create feelings of shame, guilt, and powerlessness, and these feelings are the worst motives for peace work.

Keep your eyes on the prince of peace, the one who doesn't cling to his divine power; the one who refuses to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights, and rule with great power; the one who says, “Blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness” (see Matthew 5:3-11).



See the one who touches the lame, the crippled, and the blind; the one who speaks words of forgiveness and encouragement; the one who dies alone, rejected, and despised. Keep your eyes on him who becomes poor with the poor, weak with the weak, and who is rejected with the rejected. That one, Jesus, is the source of all peace.

*Jesus, help me keep my eyes on you and bring peace to the lives of others around me. Today I will...*

THURSDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

## JESUS: GOD WITH US

*“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23)*

God has become human so as to be able, in all completeness, to live with us, suffer with us and die with us. We have found in Jesus a fellow human being who is so completely one with us that not a single weakness, pain or temptation has remained foreign to him. Precisely because Jesus is God and without any sin, he is able to experience our sinful, broken human condition so thoroughly that we may say he knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves.

No one else, however well disposed, is ever in a position to be with us so completely that we feel ourselves to be understood and loved without limit. We humans remain too self-centered to be able to forget ourselves fully for the other person's sake. But Jesus does give himself fully, he holds nothing back for himself, he wants to be with us in so total a fashion that we can never again feel alone. Jesus is the compassionate God who comes so close to us in our weakness that we can turn to him without fear.

In the end, I think it is only through prayer that you can come to understand it. When you stand before God, vulnerable as you are, and let him see all there is of you, you will begin gradually to experience for yourself what it means that God has sent Jesus to be, in all things, God-with-you.

*Jesus, help me comprehend how much you love me and want to dwell with me. Today I will...*

## OPENING OUR HEARTS TO GOD

*“May God open your heart to his law and his commandments, and may he bring peace.” (2 Maccabees 1:4)*

The mystery of the spiritual life is that Jesus desires to meet us in the seclusion of our own heart, to make his love known to us there, to free us from our fears and to make our own deepest self known to us. In the privacy of our heart, therefore, we can learn not only to know Jesus but, through Jesus, ourselves as well.

If you reflect on this a bit more, you will see an interaction between God’s love revealing itself to you and a constant growth in your self-knowledge. Each time you let the love of God penetrate deeper into your heart, you lose a bit of your anxiety, and every time you shed a bit of your anxiety, you learn to know yourself better and long all the more to be known by your loving God.

Thus, the more you learn to love God, the more you learn to know and to cherish yourself. Self-knowledge and self-love are the fruit of knowing and loving God. You can see better now what is intended by the great commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Laying our hearts totally open to God leads to a love of ourselves that enables us to give whole-hearted love to our fellow human beings. In the seclusion of our hearts we learn to know the hidden presence of God; and with that spiritual knowledge we can lead a loving life.

*Jesus, help me love myself better by realizing how much you love me. Today I will...*



## SEEING CHRIST IN THE WORLD

*“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:15, 18)*

Through prayer the Christ within us opens our eyes to the Christ among us. That is what is meant by the expression: “Spirit speaks to spirit.” The Spirit of the living Christ dwelling in our innermost being gives us eyes to contemplate the living Christ as God becomes visible in the concrete events of our history. Thus, Christians who become involved in these events do not move from prayer to politics but from prayer to prayer.

To relearn what praying for the world means, we have to realize that the burden of the world has become a light burden because of Jesus. When God saw how humanity’s sin made the world an unbearable burden—a burden of painful birth and hard labor, competition and rivalry, anger and resentment, violence and war, sickness and death—God showed us infinite mercy in sending Jesus, not to take our burden away but to transform it.

The mission of Jesus was not to wipe out all human sorrow and take away all human pain, but to enter so fully into our world of sorrow and pain that nothing human would remain alien. Jesus gathered up the human suffering of all times and places. He destroyed its fatal power by offering it to God through his voluntary death on the cross. Thus Jesus made an unbearable burden bearable. We now have a companion who has tasted the agony of humanity more fully and deeply than any other person in history.

*Jesus, help me share with you the task of ordering the world anew. Today I will...*

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## LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)*

How shall I give expression to the multitude of feelings and ideas that come together in this most joyful celebration? It is the fulfillment of four weeks of expectation; the remembrance of the most intimate mystery of life, the birth of God in an agonizing world; the planting of the seeds of compassion, freedom and peace in a harsh, unfree, and hateful society; it is hope in a new earth to come.

It is all that and much, much more. This day is the day in which I will experience not only the beauty of the night with songs of peace but also the wide ocean stretching out between two continents as I journey to Holland. This day the smallness and vulnerability of the child and the vastness of our earth will both enter my soul. I know that without the child, I have no reason to live but also that without a growing awareness of the suffering of humanity, I will not fulfill the call that the child has given me.



For me it is also the end of a most blessed and graceful retreat and the beginning of a new life. A step out of silence into the many sounds of the world, out of the cloister into the unkept garden without hedges or boundaries. In many ways I feel as though I have received a small, vulnerable child in my arms and have been asked to carry him with me into a world waiting for light to come.

*Jesus, help me to cherish your presence and also share it with each person I meet. Today I will...*