

HERE I AM



ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS 2023
SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, PALO ALTO

The sacred season of Advent invites us to offer our hearts to God in new ways. In Advent, we slow down. We wait, we listen, and we ponder the courageous words that Mary, the mother of Jesus, spoke to the angel Gabriel so many centuries ago: “Here I am.” Mary’s assent to God was faithful and vulnerable, courageous and risky at the same time. Her decision to say “yes” required her to lean into mystery, trusting that the Spirit would accompany her in her unknowing. It required her to lean into divine favor, accepting that God would accomplish beautiful and astonishing things through her life. And it required her to lean into hope, walking with God even when the going got rough.

What would it be like for us to do the same, here and now? To offer ourselves to God in boldness and trust, so that new life might spring up within us? As we contemplate these questions together, our hope is that this devotional booklet, with each Sunday of Advent paired with poetry, scripture, reflections, and art, will offer encouragement and blessing. May these words and images help each one of us to say “Here I am” this Advent.

Advent

by Pamela Cranston

Look how long
the tired world waited,
locked in its lonely cell,
guilty as a prisoner.

As you can imagine,
it sang and whistled in the dark.
It hoped. It paced and pattered about,
tidying its little piles of inconsequence.

It wept from the weight of ennui
draped like shackles on its wrists.
It raged and wailed against the walls
of its own plight.

But there was nothing
the world could do
to find its freedom.
The door was shut tight.

It could only be opened
from the outside.
Who could believe the latch
would be turned by the flower
of a newborn hand?

Prayers When Lighting the Advent Wreath

Lord God, as we light the candles of Advent, may their flame symbolize the hope that you bring into our lives. With hearts filled with anticipation, we prepare to welcome your Son, Jesus Christ, into our hearts and homes. Bless this wreath and our time of reflection during this sacred season. Amen.

Week 1 (light one purple candle)

This candle is called HOPE

Eternal God, as we await the coming of our Savior, give us the courage to hope. Give us grace to see your plans of redemption for our lives, for this community, and for the world. Through Jesus Christ, the source of our redemption and hope. Amen.



Week 2 (light two purple candles)

This candle is called PEACE

Almighty God, you offer rest for our hearts, and peace for our souls. Give us grace to seek peace in our lives, peace in this community, and peace in the world. Through Jesus Christ, the prince of peace. Amen.

Week 3 (light two purple candles and one pink candle)

This candle is called JOY

Gracious God, you came to us in human flesh and you abide with us in the Holy Spirit. Fill us with your joy, and help us shine as a light to the world. Through Jesus Christ, who makes our joy complete. Amen.

Week 4 (light all four candles)

This candle is called LOVE

Loving God, your mercy and compassion endure forever. Open our hearts, that we may receive your love; and following the example of your Son, spread that love to a love-starved world. Through Jesus Christ, who loved us to the end. Amen.

Advent 1: Seeing the Signs

Creator God, from whose womb the sea burst forth: Be with us now as we seek with your grace to give birth to a new creation filled with justice and peace, harmony and concord, unity and love for all; in the name of your Child whom we await, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Sunday Preacher: The Reverend Nancy Ross

As we begin the season of Advent, we hear Jesus say, “The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.” And then he says, “When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near.” Well... yeah. Those are some obvious signs! But truly, is the end of the world what we’re watching for?

There are signs all around us right now, and always have been, but saying “Here I Am” to them is dicey. Because the signs we see can be daunting and they call us to action as Christians. They call us to say “Yes” to God in ways that may be uncomfortable. The wars and violence, the suffering and division, the desperate want... they seem too big for us. What can one person do?

And yet, what has God shown us in this holy season? The Divine Love’s vehicle for changing the world is a vulnerable human infant, delivered through a young girl, a nobody. One person who says, “Here I am. Yes.” And the world has never been the same. The “powers in the heaven” are indeed shaken by this, this, this... this consent to birth the holy in ordinary flesh and blood, ordinary labor pains, extraordinary trust.

Keep watch! Yes! It’s Advent. But we’re not watching for the stars to fall from heaven. We’ll know when Jesus comes – *because we know he is already here*. Rather, in this holy season, we turn our eyes, open and awake, to one astoundingly bright star to alight over the birthplace of joy, of promise, of salvation – of love that changes the world. Are you watching? The star is shining over you, too. Here I am. Yes, Lord.

The Reverend Nancy Ross

Virgin
by Luci Shaw

As if until that moment
nothing real
had happened since Creation

As if outside the world were empty
so that she and he were all
there was — he mover, she moved upon

As if her submission were the most
dynamic of all works: as if
no one had ever said Yes like that

As if one day the sun had no place
in all the universe to pour its gold
but her small room



Advent 2: Comfort in the Wilderness

Life-giving God, in whom we live and move and have our being: Kindle your love within us as we await the coming of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, that we might humbly serve others in his name, both now and forever. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

Sunday Preacher: The Reverend Professor Rebecca Lyman



One of the hardest things to do in life is say “Here I am” in the wilderness. When we find ourselves in hard places – in places we didn’t choose, or in circumstances we’d much rather avoid, it’s challenging to remain present and engaged. It’s difficult to trust that God is still with us, and that God’s grace will somehow see us through the perils of the desert.

In our readings for this second week of Advent, the writers of our sacred texts assure us that God’s comfort is available to us in the wilderness. Even in the rocky, barren wastes, God “speaks tenderly” to God’s people. In fact, it is when we “prepare the way of the Lord” in the wilderness, when we “make straight in the desert a highway for our God,” that the promise of consolation comes: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”

As we move deeper into Advent, and consider what it means to wait for the coming of Jesus in a broken and treacherous world, these readings challenge us to consider hard questions about location. Can we honestly say, “Here I am” in all the places and circumstances we find ourselves in? Can we remain present enough to notice the mercies, the respites, the graces, and the gifts of the desert? One of the great paradoxes of our faith is that God might comfort us in the very places that lay us bare.

In the wilderness, life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart fast. To locate ourselves at the outskirts of our own power is to acknowledge our vulnerability in the starkest terms. In the wilderness, we have no choice but to wait and watch as if our lives depend on God showing up. Because they do. And it’s into such an environment — an environment so far removed from our own control as to make the very notion of control laughable — that the consolations of God’s love, compassion, and tenderness come.

Debie Thomas

Annunciation

by Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.

More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.

Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
like any other child – but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed
in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
than any in all of Time,
she did not quail,
only asked
a simple, 'How can this be?'
and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply,
perceiving instantly
the astounding ministry she was offered:
to bear in her womb
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry

in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power –
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.
Then bring to birth,
push out into air; a Man-child
needing, like any other,
milk and love –
but who was God.

This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
Spirit,
suspended,
waiting.

She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'

She did not submit with gritted teeth,
raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,
and the iridescent wings.

Consent,
courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.

Advent 3: I will magnify the Lord

O Hidden, Eternal, and Self-giving God, who became human for our salvation: Open our minds, liberate our hearts, and strengthen our souls, that we may live into the fullness of your desires for us; in the name of the Source, the Word, and the Spirit. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sunday Preacher: The Reverend Liz Milner

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” The ecstatic words of Mary’s prayer we call the Magnificat burst forth when she runs to her cousin Elizabeth. She had to tell someone, but Elizabeth already knew! The baby, John, leaped for joy in her womb, Elizabeth cries. Mary’s “Here I am” prompts John and Elizabeth to YES YOU ARE.

“Emmanuel,” the song of the Advent season, means “God-with-us,” and, yes, Mary carried Jesus in her very body. But we, too, carry him within us. Stop and feel the awe and joy of that. God is with us; God is within us. Mary’s spirit rejoices, and Elizabeth and not-yet-born John are overwhelmed.

May we be overcome, as well. May we shout, “YES YOU ARE, God-with-us!” It is our season of recognizing the immensity of God’s love and magnifying it out into the world. Mary extols God’s mercy to all generations. Advent, the season of pregnancy, and waiting, and preparing, is not just the quiet, is not just the stories of old. It is our ecstatic “Here I am” to bearing God within us, our very selves – and our crying out in joy at recognizing God within each person we encounter.

Sometimes, we have to look hard. But when we do, we find God looking back. Here I am. Yes you are.

The Reverend Nacny Ross

The Visitation by Malcolm Guite



Here is a meeting made of hidden joys
Of lightnings cloistered in a narrow place
From quiet hearts the sudden flame of praise
And in the womb the quickening kick of grace.

Two women on the very edge of things
Unnoticed and unknown to men of power
But in their flesh the hidden Spirit sings
And in their lives the buds of blessing flower.
And Mary stands with all we call 'too young',
Elizabeth with all called 'past their prime'
They sing today for all the great unsung
Women who turned eternity to time
Favoured of heaven, outcast on the earth
Prophets who bring the best in us to birth.

Advent 4: Let it be with me as you say

Blessed Jesus, born of our sister Mary, the first and most perfect disciple who fully accepted the will of God and acted upon it: Give us the faith to accept your will for us and the strength to carry it out, to the honor and glory of your name. Amen.

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Sunday Preacher: The Reverend Nancy Ross

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we arrive at last at the beautiful scene of the Annunciation, that historic moment when a messenger of God appeared to a young peasant girl in Nazareth, and presented her with a choice that would change her – and change the world – for all time. Reading St. Luke’s narration of this encounter, it’s easy for us to rush through it, and forget that Mary’s momentous decision might have taken time. What do you think raced through her mind when she first heard the angel Gabriel’s words? What emotions washed over her? Fear? Awe? Dread? Joy? Do you imagine she took hours to make her choice? Days? How long and with what patient tenderness did the messenger wait for her to ponder her options?

Mary’s decision was her own – just as our decisions about faith and trust are our own. It is right and good to ponder them. To meditate carefully on what it means to say “Here I am” to God. It’s not a decision we make just once in our lives; we have to make it over and over again: “I will let God in today. I will surrender to love *in this moment*. I will offer *this* wound, this fear, this loss, this dream to the Holy One who cares for me, and I will wait in hope for new life to reveal itself *here*.”



As we come to the end of this holy season, and look with anticipation to the birth of our Savior, allow Mary’s “yes” to inspire your own. Consider how and where God might be calling you in this new Church year to say, “Here I am. YES. Lord, let it be with me as you say.”

Debie Thomas

Gabriel's Annunciation

by Jan Richardson

For a moment
I hesitated
on the threshold.
For the space
of a breath
I paused,
unwilling to disturb
her last ordinary moment,
knowing that the next step
would cleave her life:
that this day
would slice her story
in two,
dividing all the days before
from all the ones
to come.
The artists would later
depict the scene:
Mary dazzled
by the archangel,
her head bowed
in humble assent,
awed by the messenger
who condescended
to leave paradise
to bestow such an honor
upon a woman, and mortal.

Yet I tell you
it was I who was dazzled,
I who found myself agape
when I came upon her—
reading, at the loom,
in the kitchen,
I cannot now recall;
only that the woman
before me—
blessed and full of grace
long before I called her so—
shimmered with
how completely
she inhabited herself,
inhabited the space
around her,
inhabited the moment
that hung between us.

I wanted to save her
from what I had been sent
to say.

Yet when the time came,
when I had stammered
the invitation
(history would not record
the sweat on my brow,

the pounding of my heart;
would not note
that I said
Do not be afraid
to myself as much as
to her)
it was she
who saved me—
her first deliverance—
her Let it be
not just declaration
to the Divine
but a word of solace,
of soothing,
of benediction

for the angel
in the doorway
who would hesitate
one last time—
just for the space
of a breath
torn from his chest—
before wrenching himself
away
from her radiant consent,
her beautiful and
awful yes.

The Nativity of Our Lord

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

Preachers: The Reverend Nick Roosevelt (8 p.m.); The Reverend Nancy Ross (10 a.m.)

On this high feast day of the Church, we welcome the Christ child who has come to be here with us. We sing with the angels and express our adoration with the shepherds. Our Gospel reading tells that the shepherds “made haste” to find Jesus when they heard the angel’s call. We read, too, that Mary “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” Can we, like the shepherds, make haste to worship Jesus? Can we, like Mary, treasure the Word who has come to us in such beautiful simplicity and vulnerability? Can we take in – even for a few moments – the astonishing truths about God that are made manifest this day? In the bold words of writer Rachel Held Evans:

“It is nearly impossible to believe: God shrinking down to the size of a zygote, implanted in the soft lining of a woman’s womb. God growing fingers and toes. God kicking and hiccupping in utero. God inching down the birth canal and entering this world covered in blood, perhaps into the steady, waiting arms of a midwife. God crying out in hunger. God reaching for his mother’s breasts. God totally relaxed, eyes closed, his chubby little arms raised over his head in a posture of complete trust. God resting in his mother’s lap.

“On the days and nights when I believe this story that we call Christianity, I cannot entirely make sense of the storyline: God trusted God’s very self, totally and completely and in full bodily form, to the care of a woman. God needed women for survival. Before Jesus fed us with the bread and the wine, the body and the blood, Jesus himself needed to be fed, by a woman. He needed a woman to say: ‘This is my body, given for you.’”

As we enter into this season of celebration, may the Christ who has come to us so generously give us the grace we need to offer ourselves to Christ in return. May our hearts be filled with the peace and joy we have waited for, and may the light that first illuminated a stable in Bethlehem so long ago, become the healing light we share with the world in Christ’s name.



Christmas

(15th Century, from the frontispiece,
Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas)

Lo, in the silent night
A child to God is born
And all is brought again
That ere was lost or lorn

Could but thy soul, O man
Become a silent night!
God would be born in thee
And set all things aright.



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