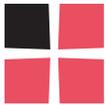


exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF DECEMBER 2018

VOLUME 28 | NUMBER 3 | WRITTEN BY **Alice Camille**



OPENING PRAYER

God of the Ages and Lord of the Now, we come to this season of Advent, which is both final and first. We bring hearts full of those who have touched our lives. We carry the memories of holidays past, loved ones absent, and dreams yet unfulfilled. Giver of every good gift, give us peace in our homes and in our world. *Amen.*

December 2 | LECTIONARY 3 FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THIS PROMISE IS FOR REAL

FIRST READING

JEREMIAH 33:14-16

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made.

Promises are easy to make, tougher to keep. Consider the friendships lost to broken confidences and repeated no-shows. Close to half of all marriages fail. Adult children are estranged from parents who pledged, time and again, to be there and were not. Public leaders spout campaign rhetoric that dissolves into thin air after Election Day. We mortals are not very good at follow-through.

Thankfully, God is a promise-maker who takes commitment seriously. God demonstrates throughout our sacred stories that being “all in” with the human race involves the package deal of a benevolent creation, heroic rescues, regular restorations, plus healing, teaching, guidance, and the occasional much-needed course corrections. Grand slam Incarnate Savior included. That’s a promise!

- » ***What kind of central promises govern your life: with God, people, institutions? What helps you to stay true to your promises?***

SECOND READING

1 THESSALONIANS 3:12–4:2

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

Advent is the season many of us can’t wait to begin. Our Jewish friends begin their observance of Chanukah on the same day this year, so we reach this time of hope together. Some of us are so eager to start celebrating that we’ve had up the lights, garland, tree, and lawn Santas for days or weeks already. I think I received my first Christmas card in October. There really is such a thing as over-anticipation.

Yet it’s hard to fault anyone for feeling a certain desperation to begin a season dedicated to the spirit of love and the reconciliation of differences. God becomes human, for heaven’s sake: if that gulf can be crossed, anything can! It can’t be more heroic to forgive those who trespass against us, to welcome the outsider, and to be more generous than usual even with strangers. Let the increase of love and understanding abound this Advent.

- » ***Who is waiting for your forgiveness this season? Whose forgiveness do you seek?***

GOSPEL

LUKE 21:25-28, 34-36

“Nations will be in dismay...”

On cozy nights before our winter fireplaces (real or fake), we find words of apocalypse perplexing and inappropriate. Why spoil our hot chocolate (powdered instant or creamily homemade) with all that noise about destruction and cataclysm? Don’t we give enough of our year over to dire headlines (genuine crisis or silly hype)? Do we have to be vigilant in prayer (or just pretend to be so, as usual) even in our happiest season? Can’t we just watch our Nativity pageants (or Rudolph, or the Grinch) in peace?

Apocalyptic sayings of Jesus can sound like Debbie Downer showing up at the world’s holiday party. The thing about Debbie is, she’s telling the truth, even if we don’t care to hear it just now. Everything phony and false will be stripped away in God’s coming reign. If we hold fast to what’s authentic, we can relax and enjoy this hour’s bliss.

- » ***God promises a final reckoning. How prepared are we to stand up for our choices?***

THE DIVINE IS IN THE DETAILS

FIRST READING

BARUCH 5:1-9

Up, Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children.

How Scripture savvy are you these days? After a lifetime of churchgoing, you may have noticed we Catholics follow a three-year cycle of biblical readings (A, B, and C) on Sundays. Every three years, the same readings repeat. In Advent during Years A and B, we hear from Isaiah, our principal prophet of hope, almost every Sunday. Yet during Year C, which happens to be this year, we don't hear from Isaiah even once. Not a peep.

Does this make Cycle C the bum year when we pull out our second-string prophets, the Minors? Who's Baruch, anyway? Baruch was the scribe who worked for Jeremiah—a Major Prophet, by the way, whom we heard from last week. Baruch's book is a collection of writings trying to make sense of the Babylonian Exile, that grim period in which Jeremiah and Baruch wrote. If God can bring good from exile, there's always hope.

» *Baruch's writing is richly descriptive. How would you describe the way God has rescued you from difficult times?*

SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 1:4-6, 8-11

God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Here's a detail we can't afford to miss. You can't teach anyone you don't truly love. You can yammer at them, beat them over the head with your agenda, corner them until they capitulate to your facts and repeat them by rote. But only love can coax minds and hearts to open up and receive an idea.

Think back on relatives you followed like a puppy and imitated like a monkey. Recall teachers who made an impression, and mentors who made a difference. Such folks were able to persuade us to grow in their example because of the way they treated us. We felt valued and cherished, taken seriously as if we mattered. On the contrary, the cold lecturer and the sullen rule bearer make us turn aside from their words. We may be forced to regurgitate their lessons and pass their tests, but as Paul understood, only relationships of love transform us in their image.

» *Tell the story of someone who taught you by their loving ways and words. What did you learn from them?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 3:1-6

In the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pilate was governor and Herod was tetrarch...

Of all the gospel writers, Luke is most precise about the world situation at the time of the birth of Jesus. Luke lines up regional leaders like kingpins, informing us in no uncertain terms that it was into such a world that "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert." Even the Baptist is identified in his context: as son of a Temple priest. More immediately, Luke notes, John's context is in the desert. What's the son of a Jerusalem priest doing out in the desert?

John recognizes his future is not with the Temple club. In fact, John terrifies them with his authority, and his career will be too short to inherit his father's priestly office. John identifies with the ancient prophecy of a "voice crying out in the desert" (Isaiah pops up in Cycle C after all!) Pay attention to the details. God speaks in them.

» *Rewrite the first sentence of this gospel passage, substituting names appropriate to our times—and put your name as the one to whom the word of God comes.*

ROSE IS FOR REJOICING

FIRST READING

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-18A

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!

Look around your parish this weekend for glimpses of rose peeping out from the Advent purple. Deep into the heart of winter darkness, we find reason to share a little joy. This week's Minor prophet hints

at why. Zephaniah was a seer who lived in Jerusalem before the time of Babylonian exile. Things were still good for Judeans in that generation. But they were about to go south—actually due east—to Babylon in a decade or two. As prophets go, Zephaniah isn't a jolly messenger. But he makes room for joy in the midst of a looming crisis, just as we do, because he's faithful to a God who's made a career out of rescuing

us. Each generation must face the mess it's made and suffer the consequences. But not forever. Fear and discouragement aren't compatible with faith in the God of mercy.

» *How do you keep your courage and sense of joy even in difficult times?*

SECOND READING

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!

It's hard not to get the message when it's hammered merrily in our direction like this. Joy is not an option for a believer. Or as a theologian put it: "God will forgive everything but a lack of joy." Why is rejoicing so imperative? Well, just think how you'd feel if you created a beautiful world, rescued it time and again, embraced it, lived in it, died for it—and that same world continued on in glum dismay despite the overwhelming avowal of your love. It's like the lover who can't please her beloved. No matter what she does or how many gifts of time, attention, and care she lavishes, he refuses to offer the gratitude of the tiniest smile. As Paul encourages the folks

at Philippi, put away anxiety, show some kindness, and embrace the peace that makes no sense at all—unless you believe.

» *Christian joy isn't bubbly mirth, but peaceful confidence in the God who is with us. How do we exemplify to others what it means to face adversity with such faith?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 3:10-18

John the Baptist preached good news to the people.

Not all the news is good, as any glance at the headlines will tell you. And not everything John the Baptist is recorded as saying sounds like a lot of fun either. John was an old-school prophet, calling

people to take a bath, wash themselves clean of the world's dirty ways, and start fresh. Because John understood that we all tend to slide into self-interest when no one's watching. I'll take that slightly bigger piece of the pie if I think I can get away with it. John counseled the opposite approach: take *half* of the piece, and give the other half away.

Did everyone who got baptized in the Jordan River stay as clean and resolved as they were that day? More importantly, do you and I keep ourselves as spiritually sweet on Monday as we present ourselves on Sunday?

» *What should we do? This is the question people asked of John. Make a list of ten things you think Christians should be doing.*

December 23

FRIENDLY VISITS

LECTIONARY 12
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING

MICAH 5:1-4A

For now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.

Who are you most looking forward to seeing in this season of homecoming and gathering? When I was younger, Christmas didn't formally arrive until my oldest sister Lucille came home. She was a nurse who worked on a Native American reservation far away. When Lucy arrived at the door, the holiday officially began. Her loving presence completed me, and my heart rested in hers the moment she enfolded me in her arms.

Today's Minor prophet tells us about another wonderful presence anticipated and desired. Micah lived at the same time as Isaiah, and they share a perspective and even some prophetic verses. (Who wrote them first, no one knows.) Isaiah's school of thought continued for two more generations, so he has a longer scroll and gets more of our attention. Yet Micah too longed for and prophesied about the One who would be peace.

» *In whose presence do you most discover peace? How can you participate in bringing peace on earth, good will toward all?*

SECOND READING

HEBREWS 10:5-10

"Behold, I come to do your will."

According to the natural order, something dies in order for something else to live. So plants surrender the soil to other plants year after year. Some plants serve as food for animals, which become supper for other animals, including us. Generations replace other generations. History turns on seasons of birth, life, death, and rebirth.

Ancient religions capitalized on this observation and established rituals of sacrifice, holocaust, and offerings. They hoped to replace social sins of the community with a fresh start in repentance. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, possibly Paul's mentor Barnabas, envisions the obedient will of Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice

that replaces the need for any other. Obedience means sacrificing our will in favor of God's will. How often do we die to ourselves in order to live for God?

» *Draw a circle that represents God's will for the world. Draw another circle identifying your will. How much do they overlap? Fill each circle with words describing what each will seeks.*

GOSPEL

LUKE 1:39-45

"And how does this happen, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

I know it's a little early, but Merry Christmas. Mary and Elizabeth have just fallen into each other's arms, their babies are yet in the womb, but Merry Christmas anyway. Because Christmas begins in the womb, begins in Mary's magnificent yes to the cosmic plan, the surrender of her will to the divine will. And though all that the world around

them may see, in this hour of visitation, is two improbably pregnant women, the eyes of faith can already see Christmas growing into the world, cell by tiny cell.

Maybe we can hold onto this quiet little scene for a moment or two, before the merry chorus of Christmas

commands the stage. The original Christmas was a quiet affair, anyway—a silent night with few takers, just some shepherds and domestic animals. As these two women whisper their secrets to each other, let's share their surprise and their joy.

» *Reflect on your circles again: God's will and yours. Imagine how Mary might have drawn her circles. What difference does a single surrendered will make?*

December 30

LECTIONARY 17A OR 17C

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

PARENTING: NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

FIRST READING

SIRACH 3:2-6, 12-14

OR 1 SAMUEL 1:20-22, 24-28

"Once the child is weaned, I will offer him as a perpetual nazirite."

Sometimes the Lectionary offers a fork in the road, with alternative readings. Which way to go: Sirach's instructions on the respect due to parents, or Hannah's complicated road to maternity? Let's follow Hannah. She wanted badly to be a mother, but couldn't conceive. Finally she prayed for a miracle, and got one. In return, Hannah dedicated her weaned son to God's service. Can we hear her mother's heart breaking as she handed tiny Samuel to the priest at the shrine? The good news for Hannah is that she'll go on to bear three more sons and two daughters. Her fidelity to her promise to God is rewarded. This never quite fills the Samuel-shaped hole in her heart, of course. But Hannah has the consolation of watching her son become a great priest, prophet, and judge. Samuel also anoints David king—of whose house Jesus will come. Hannah's boy done good.

» *Hannah gave up her baby. Mary surrendered her reputation. What are we willing to risk for the arrival of God's purposes?*

SECOND READING

COLOSSIANS 3:12-21

OR 1 JOHN 3:1-2, 21-24

Beloved, we are God's children now...

Parenting is a full-time, lifetime job with no pay, and it actually costs a lot of money to pursue it. So why do it? The fringe benefits of grandchildren are often cited. But imagine the deal from God's perspective. The whole human race throughout time finds its source in God, our faith tells us. God has an abundant supply of ever-needy, always cranky, rarely grateful children, but never any real grandchildren. This is a lousy deal for God.

Why create a world and jump-start history if all God is ever going to get out of it is children and more children? Because that's what love does. Love has to have its object, the beloved, that "other" out there at which to direct its fulfillment. Can we say God needs us for divine fulfillment? Apparently so: just look at the cross. Loving us is not God's hobby. It's a full-time, eternal job with no pay—and it costs plenty.

» *Some of us are actual parents. All of us have responsibilities to the smaller, younger, and weaker. What does your love cost you?*

GOSPEL

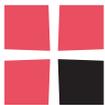
LUKE 2:41-52

His mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us?"

Even Jesus drove his mother crazy sometimes. It can be hard to factor such an idea into our image of the Holy Family. Most of the portraits we see of that remarkable group make them seem like they live in a cocoon of utter devotion to one another. That cocoon seems unmarred by real-life events like bad report cards, street fights, money worries, and childhood illnesses. Did the Holy Family escape all of these?

Luke reminds us the portraits have been airbrushed. Giving birth far from home is rough. That manger smelled like more than just straw. Matthew tells us the family became refugees for a time. Occupying soldiers bullied the populace routinely. It wasn't all posing for holy cards back then. And then, to have a kid like Jesus, who claims a divine mission at age twelve? Mary and Joseph kept a bottle of aspirin handy for days like this.

» *Family life is a vocation. What would you say are the five most essential ingredients to embracing this vocation?*



LET US PRAY...

We close this year with grateful hearts. Thank you, Lord, for each grace received. We know we are not yet the people we should be. Forgive us, Lord, for our failures in love and compassion. We begin the next journey with hopes for the future. Help us, Lord, to create a world in the image of your justice. *Amen.*

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