

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 27 November 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Stillness, waiting, peace-making – these are the colourful threads creating the beautiful tapestry of our readings in today's Liturgy of the Word for the first Sunday of Advent. Our four readings invite us to be still, to wait and listen, to be makers and receivers of peace.

Brother David Steindl-Rast osb, in a poetic reflection, gives us the sparkling colour of stillness:

May you grow still enough to hear
the small noises Earth makes in preparing for the long sleep of winter,
so that you yourself may grow calm and grounded deep within.
May you grow still enough to hear
the trickling of water seeping into the ground,
so that your soul may be softened and healed, guided in its flow.
May you grow still enough to hear
the splintering of starlight in the winter sky and the roar at earth's fiery core.
May you grow still enough to hear the stir of a single snowflake in the air
so that your inner silence may turn into hushed expectation.



The writer of the book of Isaiah invites us to come apart from our everyday world, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord that God may teach us God’s ways and that we may walk in God’s paths” (Is 2:3). The psalmist responds, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” (Ps 122:1). In his letter to the Romans, Paul invites us to wake from sleep, to put on the armour of light, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13:11, 12, 14). And Jesus in Matthew tells us, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matt 24:42).

Stillness is certainly not an easy state to find in our world. Globally, we are being reminded of the terrors of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the droughts in Africa, the dire warning of our climate emergency, the loss of so many species of life every single day, the threats to democracy all around us. Nationally, we are worried about the triple threat of COVID/RSV/Influenza placing children and older people at high risk, rising inflation and cost of living, the burden on our health systems. In our own province, we lament the fact that there are so many more people who need

good housing, good food and stronger social supports. Stillness seems elusive at best, impossible to find at worst!

The pastor Sharron R. Blezard gives us comfort that we can find this stillness, “As Christians, we expect to find Jesus in the unexpected places, in the company of unlikely people, at any time of the night or day. We expect the unexpected. We try to ready ourselves for the possibility of divine disruptions as the Spirit moves people and situations into our line of vision and into our all-too-carefully-constructed lives and overbooked schedules. It’s writ large throughout this week’s lessons from Isaiah, Romans, and Matthew. Advent bids us to stop, to breathe, to consider the marvels of creation, of each other, and of the Divine presence that infuses every molecule of the cosmos.”

Waiting and listening are the response made possible within the stillness. Veronica Lawson rsm says it so well, “Advent invites us to look forward rather than back and to dream gospel-inspired dreams that will enable creative change in our own lives and in the life of our planet. It invites us to be awake, to be ready for any eventuality. Dreams and visions have always been the precursors to effective and life-effecting change. We need the grace to see visions and to dream dreams that make for justice and peace and that permit us to walk more freely in the light of God’s ways.” It is worth noting, in the opening verse from Isaiah, that Isaiah “saw” the word of God. How do you see the word of God when you enter the stillness and wait? What are the dreams and visions that flow into your heart and spirit when you wait for the Spirit which God promises will be poured out upon us no matter how young or old we are (Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18)?

The stillness and the waiting flow into a response that leads to peace – again continuing Brother David’s words:

Peace. . . the angel announced.
But peace is as much task as gift.
Only if we become calm as earth, fluid as water, and blazing as fire
will we be able to rise to the task of peacemaking,
and the air will stir with the rush of wings of angels arriving to help us.

This is why I wish you that great inner stillness
which alone allows us to speak, even today,
without irony of “peace on earth” and, without despair, to work for it.



Psalm 122 calls us to the task of peace-making: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.’ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you’” (Ps 122:6-8). Having invited us to come apart so that God may teach us God’s ways, Isaiah ends his words with confidence that we have learned what God has been teaching us, “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (Is 2:5). Jesus confirms, “You also must be

ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Matt 24:44). Pope Francis pleads with us, “Please do not watch life go by from the balcony! Mingle where the challenges are calling you to help carry life and development forward, in the struggle over human dignity, in the fight against poverty, in the battle for values and in the many battles we encounter each day.”



One of the symbols of this stillness, waiting, and peace-making of Advent is our newly discovered Cosmic Advent Wreath. For this first Sunday of Advent, we celebrate the first incarnation, the birth of the cosmos, described so beautifully by Richard Rohr, “God’s first ‘idea’ was to become manifest - to pour out divine, infinite love into finite visible forms. The ‘First Flaring Forth’ (Big Bang) is now our scientific name for that first idea; and ‘Christ’ is our theological name. Both are about love and beauty exploding outward in all directions.”. Meister Eckhart reminds us, “God creates the entire universe fully and totally in the present now. . . God

creates the whole cosmos in the innermost depths of every soul now.” Each morning this week, let us say this heartfelt prayer:

Come, Sacred Source of All Life. Today, as we light the candle of the birth of the universe unfolding in God who fills it, we pray for an awareness of the oneness of the universe, vast and vibrating with the sound of its beginning. Like the First Flaring Forth, this small flame reminds us of our presence in the Christ in whom we live and move and have our being in this ever-expanding universe. Come, waken us to Oneness.

We conclude our reflections today with this poem-prayer from the Scottish Presbyterian minister, Roddy Hamilton:

it is ancient as old as the first word
for it is the first word ever spoken by a God
who was feeling the divine voice
for the first time

its sound has taken many forms through
the ages, but it speaks
still, the single truth it always has

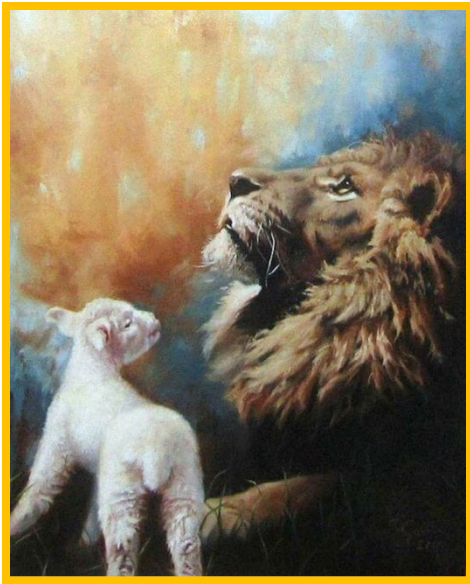
some hear it beating swords into ploughshares
others hear it hammering spears into pruning hooks
and still others hear the original word
that shaped these others
the first word:
the word, love

May your Advent be coloured by stillness, waiting, and peace-making as you hear in your very being again and again the first word ever spoken by our creating God – love!

REFLECTIONS FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 04 December 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” – today’s readings from the Liturgy of the Word for the second Sunday of Advent describe the world which God wants for Earth and for us. It is a world marked by hope, peace, joy, and love. It is a world in which each person and each Earth being feels and is safe, protected, and repeated. It is a world in which each one is expected to live into their own integrity to bring healing to the whole. It is a sacred communion of all creation.



In the first reading from the second part of the book of Isaiah, we hear an image-filled picture of that world. Humans are filled with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, and of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Animals, usually seen as predator and prey, live in the same space – the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling, the cow and the bear, the lion and the ox, the child and the asp and the adder. Not only do they live in the same space, but they relate intimately to each other – they lie down together, they eat together, they play together, they dare to touch each other. And the wonder of all – a little child leads them – not the strongest animal or the wisest adult but a little child! This new world is truly a transformed world in which right relationship defines communion, vulnerability becomes strength. What a strange world!

Psalms 72 continues this imagery. Righteousness, justice, and peace are interwoven and showered abundantly on Earth and people, “In these days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. . . from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. . . For the chosen one delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. The chosen one has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy” (Ps 72:7-8, 12-13).

Paul reminds the Romans of the gift of his Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures and our Old Testament), “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4). The gift of the Scriptures is not just the recording of the history of a group of people or a presentation of diverse literature. Rather it is, for believers, a source of steadfastness and encouragement, a source of hope. For what is that hope? Hope is exactly as Isaiah imagines it – harmony within the sacred communion, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another” (Rom 15:5). The steadfastness and encouragement which the Scriptures bring are the distinctive marks of the God who created and sustains us, the One who wishes for us the harmony described in Isaiah 35.

Ponder these two words. “Steadfastness” echoes the one word of the Old Testament which describes God’s relationship with us – “hesed” or “mercy” or “loving kindness” (as we once translated it) or “steadfast love” (as we now translate it). In Exodus 34, God describes Godself with these words, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (“hesed”) and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6). Notice “abounding”! God’s love

continues in abundance no matter how often we turn away or follow less healthy ways of finding happiness.

In the Old Testament, the word for encourage or encouragement is “hāzaq” often translated as strengthen, prevail, harden, be strong, become strong, be courageous, be firm, grow firm, or be resolute. There is one verse from the book of Joshua which describes this so beautifully. God is preparing Joshua to lead the people into the Promised Land – the realization of their dream for the past forty years of wandering in the wilderness, “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Jos 1:9). The source of the encouragement is God’s faithfulness, steadfastness. What a wonderful commandment!

The words which follow in the verses from Romans are startling! How do we live out that harmony, how do we find the hope? Paul says it plainly, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7). Inclusion is the way which we are expected to follow if we can ever achieve the harmony described in Exodus and echoed in this letter. In the parable in Matthew 25, Jesus cries out, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35). At our table of plenty, whom do we refuse to invite to the empty chair? At our table of plenty, whom do we invite to the empty chair? When was the last time you reached out to the stranger who may actually be someone you know but choose to ignore, who may be one of God’s other-than-human creatures whom you choose to ignore? “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, we meet John the Baptist, one of the key figures of the Advent season. John is certainly a man of Earth who lives in the desert of Judea. As Veronica Lawson rsm reminds us, “Desertification of earth is becoming the norm in these troubled times of fluctuating flood and fire and desert features powerfully in today’s gospel reading. The desert is the biblical place of encounter with God, the place of beginnings and of testing.” John dresses and eats as a man of Earth – he “wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt 3:4). The images he uses to convey his powerful and unequivocal message are Earth images – wilderness, the way, paths, brood of vipers, trees, fruit, fire, water, winnowing, wheat, threshing, granary, chaff.



John calls for repentance (*μετάνοια*, *metanoia*), a transformative change of heart. Jan Richardson says about him, “John appears in the gospels as a wildly liminal figure, a character who lives and works in a threshold space. He dwells in the wilderness; hangs out by a river; offers the ritual of baptism, which is an initiatory rite, even in this pre-Christian context; and devotes himself to preparing a way for the one who is to come.”

This repentance, this *metanoia*, is essential if we are to achieve the image of the communion of all creation in Isaiah, the harmony among us and welcome to all described by Paul. We cannot do this alone. John offers baptism with water to give us the strength and the encouragement to live this vision. But he promises that “the one coming after him” (Matt 3:12) will go further and baptize with water and the Holy Spirit. Our response is well stated by Veronica Lawson rsm, “We prepare the way by constantly expanding our vision and turning our lives around in the direction

of God's reign of compassionate care for all God's people and for all creation." The Irish spiritual writer, Bairbre Cahill, dares us to respond, "Incarnation invites us into a radically different relationship with the world, a relationship where everything and everyone matters. This Advent, how would it challenge and shape my faith to accept such an invitation?"

Just as the little child leads them in the transformed world that God imagines in Isaiah, so too a little child leads us into our metanoia. Ron Rolheiser omi says, "The power of God revealed in Christmas is the power of a baby, nothing more, nothing less: innocence, gentleness, helplessness, a vulnerability that can soften hearts, invite in, have us hush our voices, teach us patience, and call forth what's best in us. He just lay there, waiting for anyone good or bad to come to him, see his helplessness, feel a tug at his or her heart strings, and then gently try to coax a smile or a word out of him. That's still how God meets us."



On this second Sunday of Advent, our Cosmic Advent Wreath focuses us on incarnation in the birth of the solar system and our Earth. In Brian Swimme's words, "This vast ocean of our solar system is like a womb, that has unfolded over some five billion years to become galaxies and stars, palm and pelicans, the music of Bach and each of us alive today." Lighting our green handle, we pray:

Come, Wonderous Community of Infinite Love. Today, as we light the candle of the birth of the solar system, we pray "Triune God, wondrous community of infinite love, teach us to contemplate You in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of You. Awaken our praise and thankfulness for every being that you have made. Give us the grace to feel profoundly connected to everything that is" (*Laudato Si'*, 246). Come, waken us to praise.

We conclude our reflections with wise advice in this simple prayer-poem from Steve Garnaas-Holmes about living metanoia, finding that transforming change of heart:

"One who is more powerful than I is coming."
John isn't just hyping. He's tapping
into your already surging longing
for the Holy One to be Present:

the Loving One, who has shown you the Way,
the way of love and courage and forgiveness,
the way of trust and gratitude.

Yes, you want to greet the Chosen One,
to be among the angels singing
"Glory to God in the highest."

So how do you prepare?
How do you make a way for the Beloved,
and get ready to join the great Hallelujah?

As all the angels do. Practice.



John Baptizes Jesus, Cameroon, Jesus MAFA



The Lion and Lamb

REFLECTIONS FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT ~ 11 December 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Be joyful ~ Be patient – these two wonderful commandments are embedded in our readings in today's Liturgy of the Word. Not only do we hear the two commandments, but we are expected to hold them together! In our tradition, the focus on joy in the readings and in the words of the entrance antiphon ("Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice" – Phil 4:4) gives the name for this day in Advent, *Gaudete Sunday* ("Gaudete" is Latin for "Rejoice"). The presider at Mass will wear rose-coloured not purple vestments, and the candle on the Advent Wreath will be rose-coloured, both celebrating in joy. While in the past we would have seen the season of Advent (like the season of Lent) as a time of penitence (imaged by purple), in recent times, we have been encouraged to attend to the true theme of waiting, a period for joyful expectation.



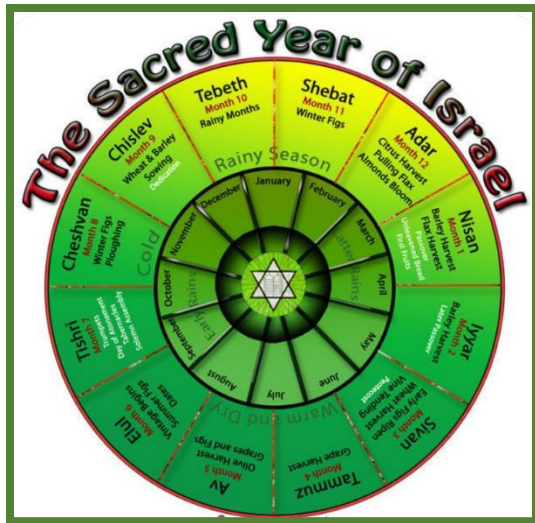
The first reading from Isaiah gives us images of two groups who are joyful and patient. The first comes from the other-than-human creation, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing" (Is 35:1-2). The winter crocus grows after Israel's long, hot summer, one of the earliest plants to bloom. A tiny plant, it stands as a powerful symbol in its ability to withstand the drought of summer. When you see the crocus, you know that the rains and new life are coming.

The second image in the reading comes from the human creation, "The lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness" (Is 35:6, 10). Both groups are marginalized and vulnerable. Both groups rejoice now because of new life which will come in the future.

Psalms 146, which begins the last set of psalms in that book of the Old Testament, echoes the same theme, "It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous" (Ps 146:6-8). The promise of a God who cares for the weakest and most at risk among us is a source of hope and joy and a resource for patient waiting.

The reading from the letter of James highlights the commandment of patience, repeating the word three times in two verses, "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient" (Jam 5:7-8). The letter reflects the same focus on rain nourishing the whole of creation as does Isaiah and as promised in Deuteronomy, "The land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land that the Lord your God cares for. The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deut 11:10-12).

Early and late rains were and are central to the life of Israel – one sign of their importance is the many Hebrew names for rain. *Yoreh* refers to early rains in October after the hot dry summer – these rains are sent down to soften up the ground, ready for the first round of planting. *Melkosh*



refers to later rains, the downpours in January and February that more easily penetrate the softer ground and bring forth the second planting harvest in the Spring.

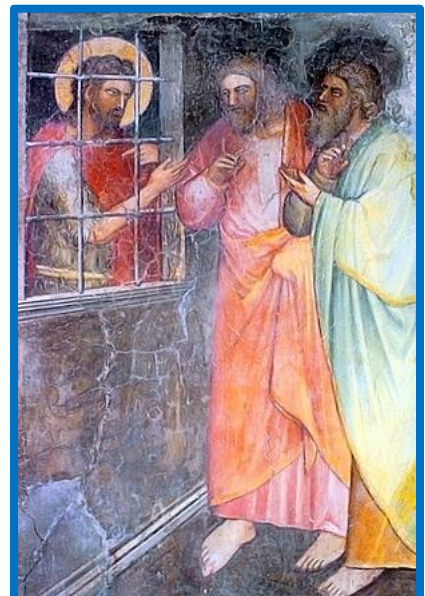
We read in Joel 2:23, “O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God who has given the early rain for your vindication and has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before.” *Geshem* is the word usually used for rain in Israel today. The three letter root for the word *geshem* is also the root for the word *lehitgashem* which means to fulfill or realize something – making something come into being that was not, the way that rain causes things to sprout up into life from shrivelled, buried and invisible seeds. God can call into existence things

that only exist in seed form – the seeds of word and promises, “Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord whose appearing is as sure as the dawn, who will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth” (Hos 6:3).

“Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” – with these words, John shows his uneasiness that Jesus is not behaving as the people and he had expected the Messiah to act; he was not a mighty king or warrior or priest. John had spoken with confidence at Jesus’ baptism. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. . . Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Matt 3:11, 13-14). The Lutheran pastor, Karoline Lewis, speaks to John’s unease, finding an application for us today:

This week, John the Baptist is in a new place. He’s gone from wilderness to pent-up-ness. From freedom to confinement. From wide-open spaces to the captivity of a cell. A change of place causes a change of perspective. No longer in the wilderness, no longer baptizing in the Jordan River, no longer having people come to him, John is now in a different desert, no longer prophesying but questioning, with people likely positioning themselves as far away from him as possible.

When you are imprisoned, your questions change. When you are captive, your yearnings change. When your freedom to roam has been taken away, you then have an altered sense of freedom, perhaps — the freedom to ask questions you have not risked asking before, you have not dared to voice, or you have been told you should not utter. . . Ask it together — not to answer it, not to solve it, not to tie it all up in a Christmas bow, but to lean in to the waiting, the wanting, and the wonder so as to hear God’s answer.



John the Baptist in Prison
Giousto de Menabuoi (1320–1391)

Jesus' response echoes the words from Isaiah 35 (4-5), "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." The spiritual writer, Debie Thomas, builds on Jesus' words, seeing not only Jesus as the unexpected Messiah but also seeing the ones who most clearly show us the face of Jesus as the unexpected ones, "John's journey is a backwards one. From certitude to doubt. From boldness to hesitation. From knowing to unknowing. From heavenly light to jail cell darkness. . . The reality of who Jesus is emerges in the lives of the plain, poor, ordinary people all around us. We glimpse his reality in shadows. We hear it in whispers. It comes to us by stealth, with subtlety, over long, quiet stretches of time."

Advent is certainly a time for patience and for joy, for hope in the unexpected, for trust that Jesus is God-with-us. For those who are following the Cosmic Advent Wreath, this third Sunday of Advent centres on the birth of Jesus the Christ, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, "Christ and Jesus are not exactly the same. In Jesus, God's presence became more obvious and believable in the world. By his incarnation (the Christ) inserted himself not just into our humanity, but into the universe which supports humanity. The presence of the incarnate word . . . shines at the heart of all things." Our prayer this week, as we light our red candle, comes from another Jesuit, John Kavanaugh, as he invites us to "bear Christ ever newly":



Come, Risen Christ, Incarnate Love. Today, as we light the candle of the birth of Jesus the Christ, we pray to "fall in love once again with the Great Mystery of God's care for us – Divine Incarnation so deep and long – as to take on our bodied lives as God's very own, even our most humble beginnings and endings, and finally, see each day as opportunity to bear Christ ever newly." Come, waken us to love.

We began our Liturgy of the Word with Earth trusting and rejoicing that Earth "shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God" (Is 35:2). Let us end with the same joy and trust and hope and patience reflected in this prayer-poem of Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

Blossoming desert

The desert shall rejoice and blossom.

Isaiah 35.1

Earth knows.

We have put her to hard labor,
taking her jewels, stripping her naked,
enslaving her under our callous appetite.
She mourns in drought, swoons with fever,
drops her glaciers like glass fallen and shattered.

She too is on this faltering journey toward the Promise.

She too longs for vision long denied.

Yet she will not withhold. She will provide.

For she too is Word made flesh.

In the joy of her Maker,

exultant in the presence of the Great Love,

she will flourish, as grace does.

Already the pines reach down, strong and confident,
the beetle priests enter their secret sanctuary,
every pilgrim bird, every angel fungus
loves their song of glory and is ready to burst forth.
Even deserts that have never known luxury
wait, debutantes, ready, unafraid.
No one has more hope than earth herself.
She will love us through this.

Weather Report

A perfect day,
perhaps not today or tomorrow
but in Earth's time, soon.
Ample sun and rain,
the breeze of Love breathing its joy,
and every species
giving and receiving.



Israeli Desert in Bloom

In this third week of Advent, let us rejoice in this present moment, waiting with patience for God's word to come in ever new and creative ways just as God has come in the incarnation in the cosmos, in Earth and Earth beings, and in the person of Jesus the Christ. Blessings of joy this week as we journey into the time of Christmas, as we bear Christ ever newly!

In the spirit of this Sunday of Rejoicing, I invite you to watch again videos which you have seen before. The first is done by children from New Zealand and shows us God in heaven considering sending the Son to Earth – a wonderful retelling of the story of the Incarnation of Jesus. The second is the telling of the story of John the Baptist by a little girl in a classroom in Dublin (listen carefully since her accent is not always easy to understand). Just cut and paste the websites.

<https://youtu.be/TM1XusYVqNY> **An Unexpected Christmas**



<https://youtu.be/TxotrR3KQwU> **The Birth of John the Baptist - Give Up Yer Aul Sins**

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 18 DECEMBER 2022

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

“Emmanuel ~ God-with-us” – on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we rejoice that we have been blessed with the wisdom and certainty that our God is a God who loves us enough to be present with us always. We celebrate that presence in today’s readings, in our shared season of light with the Jewish people through Hanukkah, and in our special tradition of the unfolding of the *O Antiphons*.

God’s Presence Among Us in the Written Word

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah calls on the king Ahaz, “Hear then” (Is 7:13). Because Ahaz does not listen, God gives him a sign, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” We know from the rest of the story that Ahaz neither hears nor sees; he chooses not to walk in the way of the Lord. In some ways, we can empathize with this king who has to make a difficult decision, and God’s way does not seem to him the best way. The sign God gives is too simple for Ahaz to take seriously. Surely a young woman giving birth to a child cannot be a sign of God’s presence!



A Quiet Moment, Timothy P. Schmalz

Yet we who are followers of Jesus the Christ believe that, centuries after the time of Ahaz, God has given us the same sign – a young woman marries a carpenter, she gives birth to a son far from her home, the little family become refugees oppressed by the rulers of their country, and her son grows up to be executed as a criminal. The Lutheran preacher, David Lose, summarizes it well, “God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people, and that God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death *and* rebirth as the children of God.”

Psalms 24 deepens that sense of God’s presence beyond us as humankind to the whole of the cosmos, “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for the Lord has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” (Ps 24:1-2). Before God chooses the people of Israel, before the coming of the Son as human among us, God becomes incarnate in the creation of the cosmos and all that dwell in it. God not only creates but becomes incarnate – God is present with the cosmos, with Earth, with all who inhabit the Earth – human and other-than-human. This is Emmanuel, the God who creates and remains present with us!

In his letter to the Romans, Paul focuses on the meaning for humans, for those “who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:6). We are not only created by God; God not only sends the Son to be human like us; but we now belong to Jesus Christ, we are “God’s beloved. . . called to be saints (holy ones)” (Rom 1:7). We belong, not in the sense of being owned by Jesus Christ, but we belong in the sense of being accepted for who you are, of being yourself and of being seen as yourself in all your uniqueness. It is this which makes you a “holy one,” one like every being created in God’s image. The blessing which follows says simply what the fruits of belonging look like, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7).

God's Presence Among Us as Exemplified in the Person of Joseph

In Matthew's Gospel, we meet one man who exemplifies this wonder of what God's presence means in your life, of who God's presence calls you to become, of who God's presence frees you to be. All four Gospels name Jesus as the son of Joseph. Matthew and Luke give more detail about his role in the birth and childhood of Jesus.

Yet we tend to pay little attention to this "righteous" man who knew so deeply in his being that God was with him that he could accept the improbable messages sent to him by an angel in four dreams. In the dream recounted in today's reading, he is told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife because she has conceived by the Spirit (Matt 1:20-21). In the second dream, he is warned to leave Bethlehem and flee to Egypt with his family (Matt 2:13). In the third dream, he is told that it is safe to return home (Matt 2:19-20). And in the fourth dream, he is warned to go to Galilee instead of returning to Judea (Matt 2:22). Can you even imagine the depth of faith that it would take to take seriously and act on such dreams: to trust that your wife-to-be has been faithful to you even though she is now pregnant, to become a refugee family in a foreign country with your young wife and a little newborn child, and to return to a new home in order to escape the wrath of the king?

Ron Rolheiser helps us understand what this really says about Joseph who trusts his God's presence in his life:

Joseph spares Mary embarrassment, he names the child as his, and he provides an accepted physical, social, and religious place for the child to be born and raised. But he does something else that is not so evident: he shows how a person can be a pious believer, deeply faithful to everything within his religious tradition, and yet at the same time be open to a mystery beyond both his human and religious understanding. What does one do when God breaks into one's life in new, previously unimaginable ways? How does one deal with an impossible conception? In essence what Joseph teaches us is how to live in loving fidelity to all that we cling to humanly and religiously, even as we are open to a mystery of God that takes us beyond all the categories of our religious practice and imagination.

There is a beautiful poem about Joseph, *O Sapientia*, written by Madeleine L'Engle, in the voice of Mary:

It was from Joseph first I learned
of love. Like me he was dismayed.
How easily he could have turned
me from his house; but, unafraid,
he put me not away from him
(O God-sent angel, pray for him).
Thus through his love was Love obeyed.
The Child's first cry came like a bell:
God's Word aloud, God's Word in deed.
The angel spoke: so it befell,
and Joseph with me in my need.
O Child whose father came from heaven,
to you another gift was given,
your earthly father chosen well.

With Joseph I was always warmed
and cherished. Even in the stable
I knew that I would not be harmed.
And, though above the angels swarmed,
man's love it was that made me able
to bear God's love, wild, formidable,
to bear God's will, through me performed.

We delight in knowing that Joseph is patron saint of both Canada and Peru.

God's Presence Among Us as Shown in the Jewish Festival of Hanukkah

This year Hanukkah begins on Sunday evening, December 18, and ends on Monday, December 26. This is a Jewish festival commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and subsequent rededication of the Second Temple at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BCE. According to tradition, there was only a small amount of oil available to light the Temple menorah. Miraculously, however, oil for just one night lasted for eight nights until more oil could be delivered.

The celebration of Hanukkah involves lighting a nine-branched menorah, with one new candle lit each night. The candle in the center, the shamash, is used to light all the other candles. There are three blessings said over the Hanukkah candles. All three are said on the first day, while only the first and second are said on the other days of Hanukkah. These three blessings will be sung in Hebrew tonight by every faithful Jewish family:



Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Source of Life,
who makes us holy through your commandments,
commanding us to kindle the Hanukkah lights.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of Life,
who performed wonderous deeds for our ancestors
in days of old at this season.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of Life,
who has keeps us alive, sustains us,
and brings us to this moment.

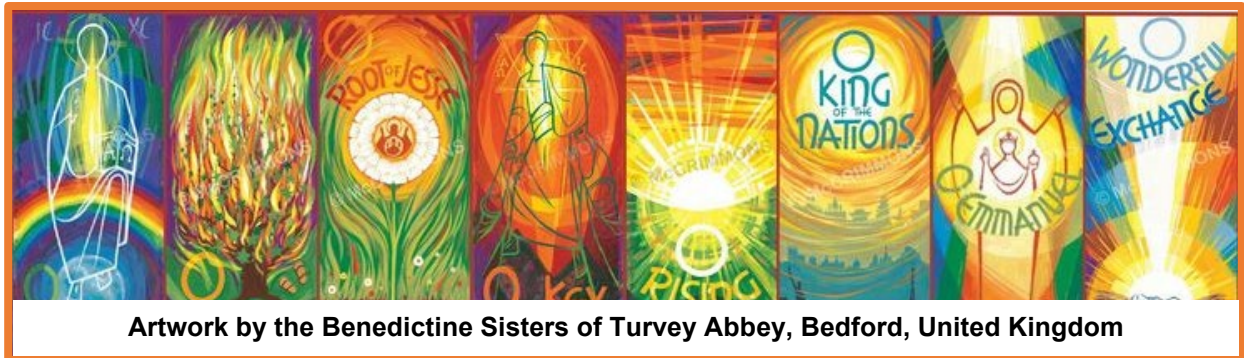
God's Presence Among Us as Shown in the Tradition of the *O Antiphons*

On Saturday December 17, we begin the celebration of the seven *O Antiphons*, each one a title of Christ, applying an attribute mentioned in Scripture. The

tradition began as early as the 6th century in Italy and was celebrated in many forms during the Middle Ages. We know it best today through the singing of the hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*:

17 December ~ *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom)
18 December ~ *O Adonai* (O Lord)
19 December ~ *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse)
20 December ~ *O Clavis David* (O Key of David)
21 December ~ *O Oriens* (O Dayspring)

22 December ~ *O Rex Gentium* (O King of the Nations)
23 December ~ *O Emmanuel* (O God-With-Us)



In one of God's never ending simple little surprises, this year on this Sunday (December 18) both the first day of the Hanukkah celebration and the second *O Antiphon* focus on God as Lord (Adonai – for Jews) and on Jesus as Lord (Adonai – for Christians).

We bring all these themes together in a poem-prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, entitled "Emmanuel":

We like to say Jesus "came down from heaven"
to show us how much God cares.
But Jesus did not "come from away."
God doesn't live in heaven.
Ever since the Exodus God has lived among God's people.
Christ's advent is not so much an arrival as an emergence,
the divine glory hidden in our midst suddenly visible,
our unity in love exposed by one who is one with us,
God's compassion secreted away in our hearts
breaking out into the open.
This is the revelation that comes to us so often late,
after the dusty journey, on our way out of the hospital,
on the other side of the treacherous bridge,
at the victory party and yes, the funeral:
that God was with us all along.
This is not news; yet we are just now opening our eyes.
The Beloved is always drawing near
and we are always, always waking up.

May this be our chant as we journey close to Christmas, "The Beloved is always drawing near
and we are always, always waking up."

Happy Advent!

