

Reasons for
HOPE



Meditations for
the Advent Season

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Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 1



Advent: A Season of Hope

The Church centers its attention these days on a season we call “Advent,” a season of preparation and hope. We are summoned in the first week of Advent to be on guard, to be ready and prepared for the coming of the Lord.

Unfortunately, this holy season gets lost in the shuffle of preparations for Christmas, already begun in our secular society. Amaze of glitter and frivolity highlights the material aspects of a feast that is long off, and misses the true spiritual meaning of that event.

So we need the Advent season to help us focus our attention on a spiritual preparation for the celebration of this greatest event of history, the birth of Christ. All too quickly Christmas day will be here. It will have much more meaning for us if we have prepared for that day spiritually.

I invite you to take out a moment each day to reflect with me on our reasons for hope this Advent season. Our spiritual guides will be the psalmist, the writers of other books of Sacred Scripture, various saints, theologians, authors, and recent popes.

Take out a little time to enter into the season with hope in your heart, awaiting this coming feast as the people of Israel did . . . as Simeon and Anna did . . . as John the Baptist did . . . as Joseph and Mary did.

You will find as they did, that God comes in a special way to the people who steadfastly hope for his coming.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

How have I celebrated Advent in the past? How will I celebrate this Advent?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 2



The Meaning of “Hope”

My dear friends, we continue our meditations for the Advent Season — Hope is a virtue that is critical for survival in life. We don't last long without it. We die physically, emotionally, and spiritually without it. Living involves hoping. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1817) says:

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the Kingdom of Heaven and eternal life as our happiness. . . . Relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. . . . Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of the chosen people which has its origin and model in the hope of Abraham, who was blessed abundantly by the promises of God fulfilled in Isaac, and who was purified by the test of the sacrifice. Paul's Letter to the Romans says of Abraham that “hoping against hope, he believed, and thus became the father of many nations” (Rom 4:18).

The people of Israel, then, starting with Abraham, were a “people of hope.” It is good for us in the Advent season to pick up the great Jewish book of prayer that is the Psalms and meditate on the messages of hope found there.

I can assure you, there are many.

Take, for example, the words of Psalm 131:2-3:

But I have calmed and quieted my soul
like a child quieted at its mother's breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and for evermore.

Can you imagine anyone more at peace than an infant in its mother's arms? The psalmist tells us that we should be just as much at peace with the Lord, who is like a caring mother. “O Israel, hope in the LORD, both now and forever” — because he brings us peace.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

What meaning do I give to the word “hope?”

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 3



“If God Is for Us . . .”

Overlooking Interstate 270, the northern outerbelt around Columbus, Ohio, is an imposing steeple on the top of the Josephinum Seminary on North High Street. I attended that seminary back in the 1960s. It was originally founded to send Germanspeaking priests to German immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

On the cornerstone of that magnificent edifice are the Latin words of St. Paul to the Romans, Chapter 8, verse 31: “*Si deus pro nobis, quis contra nos?*” “If God is for us, who is against us?”

This powerful message of St. Paul is found in his great treatise on hope, in Chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans, beginning with verse 24: “For in this hope we were saved.” Pope Benedict XVI was so captivated with those words that he began his wonderful encyclical *Spe Salvi* with them.

St. Paul goes on, eloquently:

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. . . We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. . . . If God is for us, who is against us?

St. Paul prefaces these comments with a realistic assessment of the human condition in verses 20 and 21:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. Despite all the mess in the world caused by the sin of Adam and our own selfishness and sinfulness, God has not given up on us. Thanks be to God!

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I have a sense that God is so strong a force that nothing can undermine his power in my life if I do his holy will?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 4



The One Who Hopes Lives Differently

The psalmist sums up his reason for hope: “This I know, that God is for me” (Ps 56:9), and “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise” (vv. 4-5). There you have it. The person who believes and trusts in God has it all over the person who doesn’t connect to a personal God!

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, says the same:

The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open, the one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life. To come to know God — the true God — means to receive hope (2-3).

I’ve seen that difference; you have, too — in people with hope. I think of my sister-in-law, Arlene, who was told she had ovarian cancer five years ago. It was a devastating piece of information to digest. I went to visit her with the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. I told her that was Jesus coming to her in the sacrament. He was at her bedside.

Shortly afterward, she began to perk up. Her attitude, her spirits changed. She had a new lease on life. She was able to get back to daily Mass, as she had before. And her words to me later on were: “I don’t know whether I should be praying for a cure. So many blessings have come to me through this illness.” Arlene has been a constant source of inspiration to hundreds of people since — including her own husband, my brother, recently diagnosed with cancer.

Arlene lives the gospel of hope. She preaches it with her life. She doesn’t go around sullen or despondent. She has a positive attitude, no matter what the situation . . . the way we all should have, who trust in the Lord.

“This I know, that God is for me.” “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise.”

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I live differently because I have hope?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 5



Life Eternal — A Possibility Beyond All Human Life

As we continue our meditations on hope in this season of Advent, I once again borrow an insight from Fr. Benedict Groeschel's beautiful book *After This Life*. This insightful teacher, preacher, and writer alludes to words Christ spoke to his followers at the Last Supper (Jn 14:1-7), beginning with the familiar assurance:

“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

These heartening words from our Savior are “simultaneously the promise of eternal joy in our heavenly father’s home and the preparation for the horrible torture and life-giving death of his Son” (p. 83). As we meditate on these words, says Fr. Groeschel:

. . . we discover ourselves immersed in horror and death, in failure and desolation — it is as if we are drowning. But we find we are soon brought with Christ out of the depths to everlasting hope and to something almost too exalted for us to imagine: life eternal for sinful man. Life eternal: this is a thought beyond the comprehension of creatures who live in our dying world. It is a possibility beyond all human hope, and it is offered to us despite the fact that even the best of us — the great saints among us — can never be worthy of it.

St. Paul addresses the Colossians with a similar message of hope:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing — so among yourselves, from the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth. — Col 1:3-6

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Why should we not “let our hearts be troubled”?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 6



Hope and the Future

In his letter to the Philippians (3:12-14), St. Paul indicates that he has not yet reached the goal he is aspiring to. He has not yet finished the course, grasped the prize, or reached the finish line:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. . . . Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Pope Benedict says much the same in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*: “In hope we were saved.” A distinguishing mark of Christians, he says, is the fact that they have a future:

It is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well (2).

The poet Robert Browning put it this way: “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” Hope is a future-oriented virtue. It acknowledges that there is a future awaiting us that is much, much better than the present. The virtue of hope, with its orientation to the future, enables us to handle present distresses and struggles in a positive way.

The letter to the Hebrews (11:13-16) recalls the faith of the ancients:

All of these died in faith. They did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar. By acknowledging themselves to be strangers and foreigners on the earth, they showed that they were seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking back to the place from which they had come, they would have had the opportunity of returning there. But they were searching for a better, a heavenly home. Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Pope Benedict reminds us in *Spe Salvi* that this perspective does not mean for one moment that we live only for the future (4). People in hope are building up the kingdom on earth, but they are also on pilgrimage to that eternal kingdom God has in store for those who follow him.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

What did Robert Browning mean when he wrote, “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week One: Day 7



Earthly Responsibilities and Hope

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), pointed out:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.
— N.1

In that same document, the Council fathers went on:

It is a mistake to think that because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to evade our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that because of our faith we are all the more bound to fulfill these responsibilities according to each one's vocation. — N. 43

In Matthew's Gospel (25:31-46), we discover the judgment scene depicted as the Son of Man, enthroned with his angels, summoning all the nations of the world and separating them one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Those who inherit the kingdom will be those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the sick and imprisoned. In other words, those who unknowingly helped the Lord helped themselves in helping others.

In his encyclical Spe Salvi, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us:

From the earliest times, the prospect of the judgment has influenced Christians in their daily living as a criterion by which to order their present life, as a summons to their conscience, and at the same time as hope in God's justice. . . . This looking ahead has given Christianity its importance for the present moment . . . faith in the last judgment is first and foremost hope — the need for which was made abundantly clear in the upheavals of recent centuries. — Nos. 40, 43

The pope is convinced that "the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, or in any case, the strongest argument, in favor of faith in eternal life" (n. 40). Our actions with God and others in this life will determine our union with God and others in eternal life. That is our great hope.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Why are our actions with God and others in this life important?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 8



Putting Off Heaven

A priest celebrating Holy Mass for students of a Catholic elementary school asked the question in his homily: “Who wants to be a saint and be with Jesus in heaven?” Everyone raised hands and waved them, except for Raymond, a small youngster sitting close to the priest. The priest barely got the words out “Why not?” when Raymond explained: “I want to be a saint, but as for going to heaven now, I’m too young to die.” Raymond was just ten years old. He was sincere in his answer, based on how he understood heaven.

Obviously, heaven is a mystery. Great saints like St. Thomas have honed in on some of its characteristics. *The Catechism Of The Catholic Church* states:

Heaven is the state of supreme and definitive happiness, the goal of the deepest longings of humanity . . . eternal life with God; communion of life and love with the Trinity and all the blessed. — CCC 1023, 1024, and Glossary

If we really understood its meaning at the level of the heart, we would all long for heaven, not want to avoid it. Most of us are probably closer to young Raymond in our desire to put off heaven till a later date. To that extent, we are lacking in the virtue of hope.

I think of people stricken with seemingly incurable diseases at an early age, like Cindy, the mother of three, who at thirty-one was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma shortly after giving birth to her third child. A tumor the size of a brick had invisibly laid claim to her body and was perched right over her unborn son. Little Brandon was born several stressful weeks before he was due. Cindy’s cancer eventually went into remission, but the lifesaving treatments for cancer severely damaged her heart and lungs. Hope did not come easy for her at first; but with the strength God gives her in prayer, she now discovers that she is not alone. She is able to welcome God’s help and the support of her dear family members, including Brandon, now almost seven years old. God is helping her face whatever the future brings, in hope. May he do the same for us!

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

What age is too young to be called to eternal life?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 9



Prayer and Hope

Prayer does make a difference when it comes to hope. The psalmist says as much (Ps 71:5-6, 14):

For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
Upon you have I leaned from my birth. . . .
But I will hope continually,
and will praise you yet more and more.

Psalm 33:18-19 further assures us:

Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his merciful love.
that he may deliver their soul from death,
and keep them alive in famine.

Sam Ceccola would attest to that fact. He first beat lymphoma eighteen years ago. Then, he beat skin cancer, and brain cancer, and lung cancer, and prostate cancer. What scared him was not the idea of death, as he'd come to deal with that possibility when his cancer first appeared in 1992. It was, rather, concern for his wife, who was waging her own private battle with fibromyalgia. Sam made up his mind to do everything he still could to make life easier for her (cf. *Spirit* magazine, Sept. 2010, pp. 92-96).

Besides mantle cell lymphoma, a rare and often lethal form of cancer, he also fought into remission prostate and lung cancer and faced surgery to remove a malignant brain tumor. Sam's oncologist would have given him a one-in-ten chance of survival. Radiation treatments for the lymphoma burned up his salivary glands and damaged his jaw. He suffered several attacks of a rare pneumonia that inflamed his lungs. He was diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome — often a precursor to leukemia — and a recurrence of melanoma. He was fortunate when benign polyps were found in his bladder.

But he's still fighting and praying.

People ask him all the time for his secret. How does he keep going? He answers, "I can only pray that I've inherited some of my father's genes." His 94-year-old father still lives on his own. Above all, he says, he trusts God and his doctors. That sounds like a good prescription for anyone. Praying does make a difference. It helps us put our trust in God and other people, who care for us.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Why do prayers make a difference?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 10



God Is Rich in Mercy

The diary of the great saint of Divine Mercy, St. Maria Faustina (*Divine Mercy in My Soul*), contains reflections, prayers, and mystical insights of this saint, who received various private revelations of our Lord regarding his mercy. These messages fulfill our Lord's Gospel command, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36) and give us insights on how to receive the Lord's promise, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7).

In his encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia* ("Rich in Mercy"), Pope John Paul II wrote:

The Church must consider it one of her principal duties — at every stage of history and especially in our modern age — to proclaim and to introduce into life the mystery of mercy, supremely revealed in Jesus Christ (14).

This pope beatified and canonized St. Maria Faustina and promoted her devotion by establishing Divine Mercy Sunday, the first Sunday after Easter.

Many churches display the portrait revealing the merciful Christ, with these words beneath the picture: "Jesus, I trust in you." The Lord promised a great grace to St. Faustina and all those who will proclaim his Divine Mercy: he would protect them at the hour of death.

Even if the sins of souls will be as dark as night, when the sinner turns to my mercy, he gives me the greatest praise and is the glory of my passion. When a soul praises my goodness, Satan trembles before it and flees to the very bottom of hell.

— *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 378

How important it is for people to look to the merciful Christ, seeking the grace of conversion, and entrusting themselves to his merciful compassion! The words "Jesus, I trust in you" have the power to lead one to the mercy Christ holds in store for all who seek his forgiveness and love. Those words may be the avenue to a good confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to union with Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Let us follow St. Faustina's lead and express our trust in the Lord's fathomless mercy!

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

How can I lead someone to the mercy of Christ?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 11



Appealing to the Mercy of Christ

The Lord granted special messages of hope in Divine Mercy to St. Maria Faustina, a Polish saint of the twentieth century. She was told by the Lord:

Let the greatest sinners place their trust in my mercy. They have the right before others to trust in the abyss of my mercy. . . .

I cannot punish even the greatest sinner if he makes an appeal to my compassion, but on the contrary, I justify him in my unfathomable and inscrutable mercy. . . .

Before I come as a just judge, I first open wide the door of my mercy. He who refuses to pass through the door of my mercy must pass through the door of my justice. —
Divine Mercy in My Soul, 1146

The Lord said, further:

[I am] more generous toward sinners than toward the just. It was for their sake that I came down from heaven. It was for their sake that my blood was spilled. Let them not fear to approach me; they are most in need of my mercy.

— *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1275

Oh, if sinners knew my mercy, they would not perish in such great numbers. Tell sinful souls not to be afraid to approach me; speak to them of my great mercy. . . .

The loss of each soul plunges me into mortal sadness. You always console me when you pray for sinners. The prayer most pleasing to me is prayer for the conversion of sinners. Know, my daughter, that this prayer is always heard and answered.

— *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1396-97

A great prayer during the Advent season would be a prayer of hope in Divine Mercy for the conversion of some person you know who is far away from God — even if that person may be yourself! Just utter these words, “Jesus, I trust in you,” and he will not be far from you.

Our words today are the words of the psalmist (Ps 12:6):

Lord, your mercy is my hope; my heart rejoices in your saving power. I will sing to the Lord for his goodness to me. With St. Augustine we pray, “All my hope lies only in your great mercy.”

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Offer a prayer for the conversion of someone far from the Lord.

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 12



Joy in Hope over the Sinner who Repents

We continue our Advent meditations on our reasons for hope, and we underline the most powerful reason for hope — the divine mercy of God toward all of us as sinners. The parables of the prodigal son, the lost coin, and the lost sheep of Luke's Gospel (15:1-32) dramatically portray the mystery of Divine Mercy. There, we hear the Lord say, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

St. Paul's first letter to Timothy describes Paul's remarkable conversion:

I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. — 1 Tim 1:13-17

St. Maria Faustina, the saint of Divine Mercy, received these special words of hope in a private revelation from the Lord:

When a soul sees and realizes the gravity of its sins, when the whole abyss of the misery into which it immersed itself is displayed before its eyes, let it not despair; but with trust let it throw itself into the arms of my mercy, as a child into the arms of its beloved mother. These souls have a right of priority to my compassionate heart; they have first access to my mercy. Tell them that no soul that has called upon my mercy has been disappointed or brought to shame. I delight particularly in a soul which has placed its trust in my goodness. — *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1541

What a powerful message of hope for us in this Advent season! No one is without hope who places his or her trust in the divine mercy of God. "Jesus, I trust in you!"

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Can I help someone I know hope in God's mercy by some prayer or action?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 13



Joy and Hope

We light a rose-colored candle today on the Third Sunday of Advent — a Sunday traditionally referred to as *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for “rejoice!” And it is the first word of the entrance antiphon for today’s Mass, which contain words from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 (v. 4): “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” These words highlight our joyful expectation of the Lord’s birth and second coming. Rose-colored vestments are permitted for Mass on this day as well.

Joy and hope are sister virtues. Hope spawns joy. The psalmist got it right when he prayed, in Psalm 13:5-6: But I have trusted in your merciful love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

“I have trusted in your merciful love . . . my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” It’s time for us to pull out the stops and do a little rejoicing today. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” St. Paul says. “Again I will say, Rejoice.”

I lifted another verse from St. Paul, connecting hope and joy, for the motto of my episcopal coat of arms. It is from Romans 12:12. There St. Paul tells the Romans, “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

“Rejoicing in hope” has become my motto, and sharing that message has been part of my time as a bishop. I am now forty years a priest and eleven years a bishop. I have seen much transpire in the Church and in the world these past years. My role as priest and bishop has been one of preaching hope to my people — reasons for hope and, consequently, reasons for joy.

Hope and joy come from the expectation of good things now and good things to come. And those good things come from the good news we preach. With St. Paul, I have come to see all good centered in God. All our hope is in him. When we put our hope in passing values and fads, it quickly diminishes. It dies out. When God enters the picture, there is hope; there is joy. He is our reason for hope. He is our reason for joy. *Gaudete!* Rejoice! The Lord is near! The Lord is here!

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I inspire hope and joy in others? How can I do that better?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Two: Day 14



What the World Needs Now — Hope

“The contemporary world above all needs hope,” says Pope Benedict XVI, in his Angelus reflection for the beginning of Advent of 2009. In that same reflection, he continues:

Developing peoples need it, but so do those who are economically advanced. We are becoming increasingly aware that we are all on one boat and together must save each other. Seeing so much false security collapse, we realize that what we need most is a trustworthy hope. This is found in Christ alone.

If Jesus is present, there is no longer any time that lacks meaning or is empty. If he is present, we may continue to hope, even when others can no longer assure us of any support, even when the present becomes trying.

— *Oss. Rom.* Dec. 2, 2009, p. 7

Our single most important reason for hoping in the Advent season is the coming of Christ into our world, into our lives. The word *Advent* itself can mean, “coming,” “arrival,” or “presence.” The ancient world used the word to indicate the arrival of an important official, a king, or emperor. It could also mean the coming of the divinity in some way.

The pope says that Christians have used the word “Advent” to express their relationship with Jesus Christ:

Jesus is the King who entered this poor “province” called “earth” to pay everyone a visit; he makes all those who believe in him participate in his coming.

For Christians, the essential meaning of the Latin word *Adventus* was, “God is here. He has not withdrawn from the world, he has not deserted us. Even if we cannot see and touch as we can tangible realities, he is here and comes to visit us.”

His *Adventus* — God’s coming in Christ — is our most important reason for hope in this holy Advent season.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Reflect on these words: “If Jesus is present, there is no longer any time that lacks meaning or hope.”

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 15



Christ — The Basis of Hope

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI says:

Hope marks humanity's journey, but for Christians it is enlivened by a certainty: the Lord is present in the passage of our lives. He accompanies us and will one day also dry our tears. One day, not far off, everything will find its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of justice and peace.

— *Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 2, 2009, p. 7, first vespers, Advent, 2009

The pope sees Christ as relevant not only to Christians, or even only to believers:

. . . but to all men and women, for Christ, who is the center of faith, is also the foundation of hope. And every human being is constantly in need of hope.

— Angelus reflection for the beginning of Advent, *Oss. Rom.*, Dec. 2, 2009, p. 4

In the pope's perspective, then, "Every human being is constantly in need of hope," and "Christ is the center of faith and the foundation of hope."

Like you, like the pope, I can think of a million reasons why people are in need of hope. Read the front page of your daily newspaper, the police blotter, the editorial page, the obituary page, the reasons are there: wars, hunger, starvation, epidemics, genocide, tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, suffering and distressed peoples, those forced to emigrate because of natural disasters, the world's deceased — you name it.

Yet there is a single most important reason for hope that underlies all others: the Advent, the coming of Christ. In this holy Advent season, we take time to meditate on this reason for our hope; we delve into its mystery and grandeur; we allow ourselves the spiritual opportunity to let this message penetrate our minds and hearts, leading us to hope and joy, leading us to help the coming of Christ make a difference in our lives and in the world in which we live.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Think of reasons why people need hope. How can Christ give them hope?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 16



How Christ Makes a Difference

When it comes to living a life of hope, Christ does make a difference. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul gives us a formula for allowing Christ to enter into the inevitable struggles and sufferings of life. He says that as children of God, we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). St. Paul considers “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

— Rom 8:20-21

Christ came to liberate us from all that confines us: sin, suffering, and death. He came to give us hope. His coming releases us from the fears, discouragement, disillusionment, anxiety, and oppression wrought by the sin of Adam and our own personal sins.

His coming does not mean that we no longer have to confront evil. It means we will learn better how to handle it. Jesus did not avoid evil. He faced it as an infant in the womb, hunted down because of who he was. He faced it all the way to the Cross.

St. Paul suggests that we will need to do the same, to “suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him,” knowing that the sufferings of the present are nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed.

It is important, however, that when the inevitable sufferings hit us, we don’t handle them alone; we unite them with the sufferings of Christ. Then, we allow him to embrace us in our struggles. We are better able to handle the hard times, whatever they may be. Economic and financial failures, personal relations struggles, family illnesses or deaths, lack of support from those we love, little or big misunderstandings or miscommunications.

Christ is there to help us through every trial. He is our hope and our salvation.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

How does uniting our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ enable us to handle hard times?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 17



Fear of Death vs. Helping Others

Fr. Benedict Groeschel, priest, author, and counselor, puts on his psychologist's hat when he observes (EWTN meditation, aired September 18, 2010) that most neurotic fears — even addictive behaviors — are associated with death and the difficulty of coming to grips with it.

It is our relationship with Christ and our relationship with people around us in need that helps us deal with the fear of death. Jesus tells us to get ready for death in Matthew 25:31-46, in that final judgment scene when the Son of Man comes in all his glory and separates the sheep from the goats. Those who recognized and served him in serving the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, and the naked, are placed on his right side and inherit the kingdom. Those who failed to do so are placed on his left and inherit eternal punishment.

If we want to get ready for death and be relieved of fear of death — if we want to obtain hope in everlasting life — we can experience that hope by helping other people. Fr. Groeschel and I wrote about this topic in a little book of meditations called *When Did We See You, Lord?* published by Our Sunday Visitor. (It would make a nice Christmas present for yourself or for some family member or friend!)

Fr. Groeschel writes in his introduction, “The grace of love for the needy is one of the most precious and spiritually enriching gifts one can receive from God.” The season we are in now is one of the special times of the year when people think about the needs of other people.

Certainly such an attitude should pervade our thinking all through the year, not just at Advent and Christmas, as Fr. Groeschel suggests:

Those who bear the name “Christian” but do not invest themselves in charity, in whatever way they can, are — according to so gentle a soul as Mother Teresa — in grave spiritual danger.

Those who help others in need bring physical, psychological, and spiritual help and hope to the needy — but also to themselves, as benefactors. Helping others is one of the greatest sources of hope to our lives and helps us radiate the hope of Christ to our world.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

How does investing ourselves in charity help us to overcome our fear of death?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 18



Passing Up an Opportunity to Serve

I like the story about Mother Teresa, now Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, being on her way to attend a conference on hunger in Bombay (Mumbai), India. On her way there she got lost and arrived late. On her way into the conference, right in front of the conference site — where hundreds of people were talking about food distribution and hunger — Mother Teresa discovered a dying man. With the help of one of her sisters, she picked the man up and took him home, comforting him and preparing him for death.

She never got to the conference on hunger, where people were talking about how in fifteen years they could have so much food — so much this, so much that. She never made into the midst of the lofty discussion; Jesus stopped her at the entrance to the conference hall, in the form of a dying man.

No doubt participants of the conference had passed the same man by on their way into the building, but none of them had stopped, like those in the biblical account of the Good Samaritan. They had places to go, things to do. But then, so did Mother Teresa.

How easy it is for us to pass the buck when it comes to compassion and mercy! We have many reasons for letting someone else take on humanity's needs. We have many arguments as to why we shouldn't get involved. But are they good reasons?

There is one motivation for us to do as Mother Teresa did — that is to discover Jesus Christ lying on the sidewalk or on the roadways of life, as he beckons for us to come to his rescue. He doesn't tell us to take him down the street to the nearest Salvation Army. He tells us to take him to our own home or the nearest place to get some food or shelter. We will be judged as to how we handle the sick, the hungry and thirsty, the homeless, the naked, and the imprisoned. In this holy Advent season, can we bring a little more hope into our world by helping others? Can we bring a little more hope into our own lives by thinking less of ourselves and more of others? Not an easy task, but the Christ who comes to us in this Advent season will help us see him in the face of those in need and bring all of us hope.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Why am I tempted to “pass the buck,” to avoid service with silence and inaction?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 19



Hope for Addictive Behavior

Some years ago when I was a pastor in St. Augustine, Florida, parishioners of mine, along with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, helped start a farm to get the street people passing through our town off the street. We called the farm the St. Vincent de Paul Farm, and the community residing there the Our Lady Of Hope Community. There are now two farm communities for men and one for women in that area, plus another men's community near Hanceville, Alabama.

The reason for the success of the project comes down to a religious sister by the name of Mother Elvira Petrozzi. I met her in Italy after I discovered that we didn't have a handle on addictive behavior, and I heard about her Cenacolo community and its farms.

Mother Elvira doesn't approach addictive behavior quite the way most other people do. She centers her approach around the hopeful message of Jesus Christ and the resources of our Catholic faith — the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Holy Mass, devotion to the Blessed Mother — along with hard physical manual labor, heavy discipline, and the support of a community of brothers and sisters in Christ. She doesn't charge those who make the three-year commitment, but she does ask a lot of involvement by both the person entering her community and that person's family members. It is a little like a monastic way of life — or basic training for the Marines!

I've seen people go from despair to hope, from darkness to light, from addictive behavior to charitable behavior. But it takes time and a lot of hope, which comes from a very heavy life of prayer.

Mother Elvira's philosophy is that if a person has to eat three times a day to nourish the body, a person also needs to eat (pray) at least three times a day to nourish the soul. All community members (in each of about sixty communities throughout the world) pray daily before the Blessed Sacrament. Devotion to the Blessed Mother is a major component of the life of prayer. There is hope for healing, for people struggling with addictions and other problems. Why not add prayer to the rehabilitative regimen, as Mother Elvira Petrozzi does?

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

What insights of Mother Elvira do you find helpful?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 20



The Saints: Models of Hope

The saints are special models for the life of Christ. In their lifetimes, they were people of great hope. Against great odds and in the face of many obstacles, they carried on and never gave up, knowing Christ was with them every step of the way.

The saints are there for us today, encouraging us, supporting us, and walking with us in faith, hope, and love. Pope Benedict XVI says:

In the life of each one of us there are very dear persons, to whom we feel particularly close; some are already in God's arms, others still share with us the journey of life: they are our parents, relatives, educators. They are persons to whom we have done good or from whom we have received good. They are persons we know we can count on. It is . . . important to have travel companions on the journey of our Christian life. . . . A spiritual director, a confessor, persons with whom we can share the experience of faith.

The pope also considers as our "companions" the Virgin Mary and the saints:

Each one should have a saint that is familiar to him, to whom he feels close with prayer and intercession, but also to imitate him or her.

Our Holy Father invites us to know the saints better, "beginning with the one whose name" we bear, "by reading his life" and his writings. We "can be certain that they will become good guides to love the Lord ever more and valid aids for our "human and Christian growth."

The pope has a special devotion to the saints whose name he bears, Joseph (from his baptismal name) and Benedict (the name he chose as pope). He also has a great devotion to St. Augustine.

What is your saint's name? Do you have special devotion to various saints? When I was in the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, our diocesan patron was St. John the Baptist. Here in Birmingham, our diocesan patrons are St. Paul and St. John Vianney. My personal patron is St. Robert Bellarmine. Let us look to the saints of past and present as models for life, models of hope. They want to help us hope always in the Lord and serve for us as great examples of the virtue of hope.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

What saint helps me to hope? What about my own patron saint?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Three: Day 21



Having Recourse to Angels and Archangels

The famous bishop of Geneva, St. Francis de Sales, had a particular devotion to his guardian angel. He celebrated the Feast of the Guardian Angels with special care and piety. He looked to his guardian angel for blessing in the most important actions in his life and was devoted to not only his own guardian angel, but also to the angels of his friends. He even had devotion to the angels of those who had left the Church; in his disputes with the Huguenots, he invoked their angels.

In the confessional, he frequently invoked the guardian angel of his penitent. And, in letters to friends, he recommended devotion to their guardian angel.

When he was absent from his diocese, he commended the diocese to the care of his holy angel, and he never failed to recognize the angels protecting the kingdoms, provinces, or parishes he entered. In this world, he said, the angels attend to almost everything, as they are the messengers of God, and invisible.

How much happens for good in our lives because of our guardian angels! How much they assist us in maintaining a disposition of hope and of joy in serving the Lord!

I was installed as bishop of the Diocese Of Birmingham on October 2, 2007, the Feast of the Guardian Angels. Previously, I had been ordained a bishop for the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, on September 29, 1999, the feast of the archangels Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel. I pray twice a day to my guardian angel and to St. Michael.

I offer for your consideration the fact of the angels being special emissaries and ambassadors of hope. They don't allow us to be caught in a web of negativism, pessimism, or defeatism, but rather surround us with one of realism, optimism, and hope. They help us to identify problems where they are and to find our way to the proper solutions without fear or anxiety, but with hope. As a speedy deliverance from the bondage of a negative attitude and a negative spirit, I recommend frequent prayers to the angels, who are sent by God precisely to bring us greater hope and greater joy in all we do for the Kingdom of God.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I pray to my guardian angel? Why or why not?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Four: Day 22



The Holy Eucharist and Hope

The greatest source of hope this side of eternity is the sacrament of hope, the sacrament of encounter with Christ that is the Holy Eucharist. The document of the Second Vatican Council that begins with the words “joy” and “hope,” *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution On The Church in the Modern World), says:

Christ left to his followers a pledge of . . . hope and food for the journey in the sacrament of faith, in which natural elements, the fruits of human cultivation, are changed into his glorified body and blood, as a supper of brotherly and sisterly communion and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet (38).

Those who frequent this sacrament — receiving it often, if not daily — know that one of the fruits of the sacrament is the virtue of hope. *Gaudium et Spes* refers to this sacrament as a “pledge of hope and food for the journey” that Christ left to his followers.

This document of Vatican II opened with these words:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity (1).

In the general intercessions at Holy Mass, we bring the “joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted.” We name those needs and address them to God our Father, through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We know that those pleas to God register with him, as they come directly to God through the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the compassionate and merciful heart of Christ.

When we bring our prayers and petitions to Holy Mass, we should trust that they are heard by God and that God will bring a most fitting response — in his good time, his unique way, and his providential plan — to all the prayers of our hearts. We might take them to Christ, with the added prayer: “Jesus, I trust in you.”

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I bring my special needs to Holy Mass and entrust them to the care of the Lord?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Four: Day 23



St. John the Baptist: Emissary of Hope

In our final days of Advent, we reflect on the holy people who paved the way by their hopefulness for the coming of Christ. First among them is St. John the Baptist, the precursor of the Lord, the one who paved the way for his coming through his penitential life-style and his preaching of the truth, no matter what.

John and his followers fasted and prayed, living on little — in John's case, on grasshoppers and wild honey. He lived this way in anticipation and hope for the coming of the Messiah. As we anticipate great events like the feast of Christ's birth, there is a penitential spirit in our preparations. The color purple reflects our penitential period of preparation. What goes with this sacred time may not be eating grasshoppers and wild honey, but there should be some effort at suggesting that we are in a holding pattern of hope and expectation. We are not in the celebratory mood yet. St. John sets the tone for us here.

He also sets the tone in helping us lead lives of integrity, as he did. We can truly hope that the Messiah is coming into our lives if we have discarded the cobwebs of selfishness and sinfulness, replacing them with honesty, integrity, truthfulness, and charity. What is lived on the outside must reflect what is true on the inside.

We are called to speak the truth. We are called to live the truth. And probably we have a ways to go in our journey toward integrity of life. So we appeal to St. John the Baptist to help us on this. Probably a little more prayer and a little more fasting will help us, as it helped this special saint of the Advent season.

I got to know St. John the Baptist well when I was Bishop of Charleston, South Carolina. He was patron of the cathedral there and patron of the diocese, and his picture hung in the chapel of my private residence. He reminded me of my call as a bishop to live a life of penance and integrity. In so doing, he helped me maintain a perspective of hope. We all know the Lord is just around the corner for those who hope in him, as did St. John the Baptist.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Do I need to do a little more praying or fasting in this holy season of Advent to prepare in hopefulness for the coming of Christ?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Four: Day 24



The People of Hope who Greeted Jesus

In this Advent season, we meditate on the figures of Simeon and Anna, who had the blessing of waiting in expectation and hope for the coming of the Messiah. They were there to greet Jesus when his parents presented him in the Temple. Simeon is described as righteous and pious, awaiting the “consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25). The Holy Spirit had revealed to him “that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (26). In joy, he prays:

“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”
— Lk 2:29-32

The 84-year-old widow Anna, daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher, came to the Temple constantly, worshiping day and night in fasting and prayer (Lk 2:37). She was a woman of hope, and her prayer of hope was rewarded with a vision of the Messiah. “She gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (38).

Then there were the Magi. Pope Benedict refers to them in *Spe Salvi* (5), quoting St. Gregory Nazianzen:

At the very moment when the Magi, guided by the star, adored Christ the new King, astrology came to an end, because the stars were now moving in the orbit determined by Christ. . . . This scene, in fact overturns the world-view of that time, which in a different way has become fashionable once again today. It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love — a person.

The Magi found a new way to hope in the Christ Child of Bethlehem. And the shepherds, watching in their fields by night, though not looking for the Messiah, had simple enough hearts to receive a message of hope. That message can come to anyone at any time, if one’s heart is open and disposed, as were theirs.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Would I have been one of those hopeful people who awaited the coming of the Messiah and welcomed him?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Four: Day 25



Mary and Joseph: Advent Models of Hope

Among the great figures of Advent is Joseph, from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, of the house and lineage of David (Lk 2:4), espoused to Mary. He is an upright man, a man of hope, who had to place a lot of trust in God to fulfill the role ahead of him, as described in a dream by an angel who told him that the child to be born of Mary was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is to name the child Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21-22). Joseph is presented as the man who trusted in God at every moment, difficult though his role was.

St. Joseph is the patron of the Universal Church, guiding the Church through the vicissitudes of history as he guided and protected his foster son, Jesus. Friends of mine in the Cenacolo community, serving people struggling with addictions, pray to him every evening before supper. After they bow down to the floor in their chapel, they say these words: “San Giuseppe, grazie; provvede per noi” (“St. Joseph, thank you; provide for us”). St. Joseph always comes through for them. He will always come through for us, too, because he was a man of hope and trust in God. He wants us to be the same.

Mary holds many titles of honor, but a special title is “Our Lady of Hope” or “Mother of Hope.” Pope Benedict highlights the role of Mary as a figure of hope:

The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light . . . but to reach him we also need lights close by — people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? With her “yes” she opened the door of our world to God himself; she became the living ark of the covenant, in whom God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched his tent among us (cf. Jn 1:14). — Spe Salvi, 49

When presented the invitation to be the mother of the Messiah, the Mother of God, Mary understandably wondered and questioned how such a role could be hers. But she never doubted — unlike Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, when confronted with the invitation to fatherhood late in life. His questioning led to lack of trust. Mary “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45).

Let us look to Mary and Joseph as true models of hope for us in this holy Advent season.

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Why are Mary and Joseph great models of hope for us? How does prayer to them inspire hope in us?

Light a Candle

Let us pray.

Lord, watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. In this holy season of Advent, lead them closer to you in hope, by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

Reasons for Hope Meditations for the Advent Season

Week Four: Day 26



Christ our Hope — “Emmanuel”

In Psalm 46, the psalmist boldly proclaims:

God is for us a refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. . . .

The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

— Ps 46:1-3, 11

“The Lord of hosts is with us,” says the psalmist, and how right he is! Those words take flesh with the coming of God into this world in Jesus. God crept up on humanity and went beyond the wildest imaginings of the psalmist — or the prophet Isaiah, who told of a sign, promised by the Lord:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.
— Is 7:14

Matthew’s Gospel has the angel recall this prophecy to Joseph in a dream as he writes:
All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and his name shall be called “Emmanuel” (which means, God with us).
— Mt 1:22-23

The single most important reason for our hope that underlines all others is the Advent, the coming of Christ into this world, as “Emmanuel,” as “God with us.” Christ arrives on the scene to help us through every trial and tribulation, every source of suffering and distress. He, Christ, is our hope and our salvation. His identity with us was to baffle the people of his time and all time.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son of the Father.
— Jn 1:14

For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
— Jn 3:16

How powerful is that message and it will take more than a day — more like a lifetime — to digest. Emmanuel: “God with us.” God becoming one with us . . . divinity united with humanity in Jesus. This is the Advent that we celebrate in a powerful way on Christmas Day!

And we, in turn, are called to translate that reality of God's love by activating it in our own lives through love of God and our neighbor. During his visit to England, Pope Benedict had these words for some 4,000 young Catholic students in London (Sept. 17, 2010):

We need to have the courage to place our deepest hopes in God alone, not in money, in a career, in worldly success, or in our relationships with others, but in God. Only he can satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts.

Today, we entrust the deepest needs of our hearts to the Emmanuel of the first Christmas Day. And, in turn, we bring his light, his love, his very presence as "Emmanuel," "God with us," into the world in which we live.

Christ is our hope, and through his love for us we bring Christ, our hope, into a world that is trying to find meaning and hope. Let us celebrate today and long into the future this Christ who is "God with us," born in Bethlehem. He is our hope and our salvation!

Question for Reflection/Action/Commitment

Reflect on these words from St. Paul's letter to the Romans 12:11-12:

Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

And reflect on these words from a meditation by St. Patrick:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man
Who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone
Who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

Let us pray.

Lord, "God with us" in Jesus, "Emmanuel," watch over your people, who come to you in confidence. Strengthen the hearts of those who hope in you. Give courage to those who falter because of their failures. Lead them along in this holy season closer to you in hope by the power of your Holy Spirit. May they one day proclaim your saving acts of kindness in your eternal kingdom. Amen.

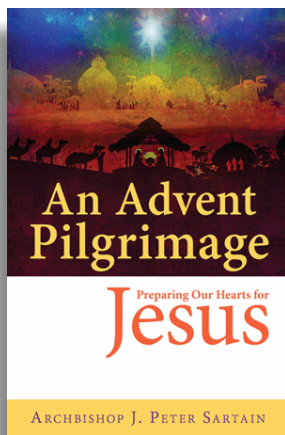
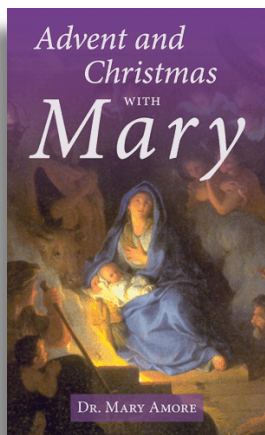
(At this point, light the white Christ candle of hope, and blow out the four Advent candles, signifying the end of the Advent season and the beginning of the Christmas season.)

Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope.
This is my comfort in my affliction
that your promise gives me life.

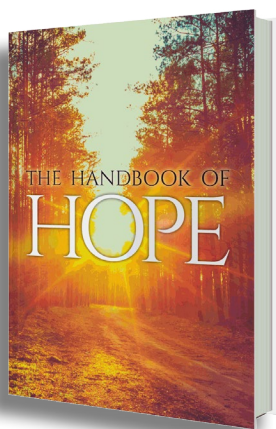
— Ps 119:49-50



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