

From Holidays to Holy Days

Sunday of the First Week

Your life is made up of millions of unique moments, each one an opportunity that will never come again. How might you use Advent to make yourself more aware of these special opportunities in your own life? Is there some decision or task that you have been putting off but that you could address right now as a response to Advent's urgent call?

Monday of the First Week

Take a favorite Advent hymn and meditate on its words. Here are two verses of a modern carol first published in *The Oxford Book of Carols* in 1928:

People, look east. The time is near
Of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able,
Trim the hearth and set the table.
People, look east and sing today:
Love, the Guest is on the way.

Angels announce with shouts of mirth,
Him who brings new life to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming
With the word, the Lord is coming
People, look east and sing today:
Love, the Lord, is on the way.¹
—Eleanor Farjeon

Tuesday of the First Week

As we await during Advent God's ultimate act of compassion, the coming of our Savior, we have plenty of opportunities to be compassionate to others. Think of one or two steps you might take to put compassion into action during Advent. You may want to ask God to point out to you someone who especially needs your help during this holy season.

Wednesday of the First Week

Christmas wreaths can serve to remind you to lead a life worthy of the "crown of life" that has been laid up for you in heaven. Think of some practice you might undertake during Advent, or one you are already doing: perhaps some extra prayer each day, or an effort to be especially kind to someone you find difficult to get along with. Then every time you see a Christmas wreath let it remind you of your Advent resolution and of the victor's wreath in heaven that has your name on it.

Thursday of the First Week

Ask Jesus to help you this Advent to prepare his way. Think of a couple of rough places in your life that need to be smoothed out to allow the Lord easier entry into your life. What about some heights that need to be lowered or a certain valley that needs to be filled in? Is one of these a project that might need to be worked on all year long?

Friday of the First Week

Your life is an integral part of the wider story of God's infinite, ongoing love for the world. Think of some personal memories that you associate with Christmas time, and ask yourself how these fit into the story of your relationship with God. Try using the ancient Christian practice of putting things into perspective by seeing them as reflecting the experience of someone in the Bible: if some of your memories are unhappy or unpleasant, you can identify with the fear that the Israelites felt as God led them out into the wilderness; if you're confused, reflect on the perplexity that the Virgin Mary must have felt when hearing Gabriel's message in Nazareth. On a good day you may want to sing with Miriam as she shouts her song of victory after Israel has escaped through the Red Sea.

Saturday of the First Week

Saint Augustine wrote that all of our longings and desires are actually part of the one single desire for the Infinite. Think of some passionate longings of yours, such as your love for a specific person, or a certain goal you are striving for. Reflect on each of these, asking yourself how this longing helps you in your quest to get closer to God. Is your longing for God as intense and passionate as this particular desire?

Sunday of the Second Week

Saint Benedict says that a monk ought always to keep death before his eyes, that is, to behave as he would if he knew that Christ were about to arrive.

It is difficult to maintain that kind of awareness, but you might take the opportunity right now to ask yourself if there is some behavior you need to change, or some unfinished business that you have been postponing. Let the holiday decorations you see along the street remind you that one day Christ will indeed return in glory—you just don't know when.

Monday of the Second Week

In what situations or with what people are you most able to take a "gentle" approach and accept a situation you cannot change? When are you least likely to take that approach? Think of some stressful situation that is likely to come up during the holidays. How might you handle it with a "gentle" approach?

Tuesday of the Second Week

Think of some way or ways in which God has come into your life recently and revealed to you something of the divine nature. What did you learn about God?

To what extent do you leave yourself open to the Lord in your prayer, and to what extent do you hide or hold back? What about your relationships with others? Might God's self-revealing action at Christmas have a message for you with regard to either of these areas?

Wednesday of the Second Week

Picture an imaginary Christmas tree representing Christ at the center of your life. How would you want to decorate it? Try hanging on its branches not only your victories, the things you are most proud of, but also the faults and problems that Christ has helped you with. If you were to include pictures of people, whose pictures would you hang there first?

Thursday of the Second Week

In 1 Peter 5:7 we read "Cast all your cares on the Lord." Think of one specific worry of yours that you might cast upon the Lord during the busy holiday season. Then think of someone you worry about and lift that person up to the Lord as well.

As part of your Advent preparation, ask yourself if there is perhaps someone you worry about too much. On the other hand, is there someone else for whom the Lord may want you to feel more concern than you do?

The scripture passage below, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is a short treatise on worrying; the word 'worry' occurs in it six times.

Friday of the Second Week

As you think of Jesus' choosing to be born into poverty at Bethlehem, ask yourself if there may be something which you are being called to let go of during this Advent season. Maybe new circumstances are forcing you to let go of some comfortable situation or some pleasant relationship, or perhaps age or illness is taking away a certain physical or mental ability you used to enjoy. Think of this deprivation as a share in the voluntary poverty of Jesus in Bethlehem, and offer it to him as a gift.

Saturday of the Second Week

Think of one or two ways in which God has “dropped a letter at your feet” recently. Did you recognize it right away? Was its message a welcome one? How did you respond to it? When has the Lord used you to deliver a message of love and concern to someone?

Sunday of the Third Week

Think of someone you know who radiates Christian joy. What is it about that person that makes you think of him or her as joyful? Think of some ways you might show that same joy to others during this holy season.

Monday of the Third Week

Reflect on your home as a sacred place in which you encounter the Lord. Take a few minutes to name the various ways in which you meet God there: relaxing with family members, sharing meals, praying, and so on. What might you do during Advent to make you and your family members more aware of this sacredness?

What might you do during Advent to celebrate your membership in the wider household of God, the church?

Tuesday of the Third Week

Are there things that you have to do during the holidays which you usually look at as being done out of love? Think of some holiday task or obligation you do not particularly enjoy, and try looking at it as something you do out of love for others.

Wednesday of the Third Week

If Saint Nicholas imitated Christ’s self-giving by being good to the poor and the needy, how are you called to do the same in your life? Is there some particular person or group you might be called to help during this holy season? How might you be called to imitate Saint Nicholas, not just during the holidays but throughout the year?

Thursday of the Third Week

In your relationship with God, do you see yourself more often as the seeker or the one being sought? What are some ways in which you seek God? Think of some ways in which God may have been seeking you lately. What do you think you might need to change during these holy days in order to allow the Lord to catch up with you?

Friday of the Third Week

Reflect on Saint John’s image of heaven: “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9). Put yourself into that scene for a moment. Imagine the sounds, feel the press of the people around you, try to sense the joy of the millions of white-robed “saints.”

Think about one of the various crowds you may encounter during the holidays: at a concert, for example, or at a shopping mall, or even in church. Reflect on these facts: each person in that crowd is personally known and loved by God, and each of them is likely to wind up in that heavenly throng with you. In that world there will be no more walls of fear or animosity to separate us from one another. Look into your own heart for any walls that you may have placed there, which separate you from certain individuals or groups, and remember that at the coming of our Lord, those walls will come down to make way for the single white-robed throng. Think of a specific thing you might do during this holy season to start breaking down one of those walls ahead of time.

Sunday of the Fourth Week

Read the account of the preaching of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1–12 (the first three verses of which are cited in the scripture section that follows). Try to feel the urgency of the past tense of “to draw near” in the expression “the kingdom has already appeared in your midst!” Let it give you a more urgent attitude toward some difficult decision you have been putting off or some change you need to make.

December 17

Pepita found out what God can do with a gift that is offered with love. Think of someone whose sincere efforts may not live up to your expectations; do you perhaps need to see those efforts the way God sees your own—as something not only acceptable but beautiful? Perhaps one day the sight of a poinsettia plant may encourage you not to give up, even when your efforts seem inadequate or the results disappointing.

December 18

Picture yourself traveling the road to heaven. Assuming that you are not on the road alone, how important is the presence of others? Do they help you to achieve your heavenly goal? Think of something you might do during Advent or Christmas to celebrate or strengthen your connection with certain people who are important to you.

December 19

Think of someone you know who seems to enjoy cooking for people as a way of loving family and friends, with no expectation of return. Do you ever have opportunities to love without expecting anything in return? Think of how you might use some such opportunity during the season of Advent or Christmas.

December 20

Is there a specific area in which your “Martha” side tends to take over and cause you to lose perspective on what is most important in Christian life? Is there something you might do to help yourself achieve more balance between the practical, active side of your life and the reflective, listening side, especially during this busy time of the year? Pray that Martha and Mary will learn to live in harmony as sisters in your heart.

December 21

As you put up lights as holiday decorations or see them in various places this Advent, ask yourself how you might be more of a light to those around you, especially in your home and your workplace.

Meditate on the verses from the prologue to John’s gospel that follow, in which the word light appears seven times.

December 22

Think of people you are expecting to welcome as guests—and who, Benedict tells us, should be received as Christ. Are some of them easier to welcome than others? Who are the guests in whom you find it easiest to see Christ? Are there some in whom you find it difficult to experience the presence of Christ? You might pray that you will be able to see and welcome Christ in each one of them.

December 23

Think of some visits you have made during the holidays (or perhaps some that are still to come), and reflect on each of them in terms of the wider biblical sense of “visit.”

When do your encounters with others tend to be life-giving and healing for you or for the other person? When do they sometimes fall short?

December 24

Have you ever experienced having to make a significant decision about your life without being sure that it was the correct one? Think of some important question or decision facing you, and ask Jesus to give you the grace to put all the pieces together correctly.

Reflect on the verse cited in the scripture section immediately below. Try to imagine what Jesus is feeling and thinking as he baptizes people in the Jordan, imitating his cousin, John the Baptist, who is baptizing a few miles away. What questions might Jesus be asking himself? What is he asking of his heavenly Father?

December 25

On this Christmas Day, think of the gifts that God has given you over the years. Make a list of several of them and, as you look at each one, ask yourself some questions: Did you ask for this gift? How have you shown God that you appreciate this gift? Is God perhaps expecting you to do still more with it?

The traditional list of “the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit” is based on the passage cited in the scripture section that follows.

December 26

Think of someone who has brought Christ's presence into your life through his or her love and concern for you. Can you think of people for whom you are or could be the presence of Christ?

Saint Benedict is fond of pointing out that Christ is present in the people around us—especially the least likely ones. Think of a couple of people whom you find difficult, and reflect on the fact that each of them is Christ present in your life.

December 27

Meditate on the passage cited in the scripture section that follows. Picture yourself seated at the messianic banquet in the kingdom. Who are the special people you're sure will be there with you? How does it feel to be with them?

Now, think of some people who you might be surprised or even disappointed to see there. Ask the Lord of the banquet, during these holy days, to help you to love as God loves, without boundaries or limits.

December 28

Look at your own experiences of the Christmas holidays—many of them enjoyable but others less so—and try to see how God was present to you in various people, events, and places. Then think of certain events in the past in which the Lord was present in a special way.

December 29

Bells are signs of God's constant loving presence in the everyday life of the world. Reflect on the kind of sign that you are to other people by your actions. What aspects of your life are most likely to be signs of hope and encouragement to those around you? Do your words, for example, carry a message of joy and hope, especially during this holy season, to people who may be sad and discouraged?

December 30

Think of a recent “gift” that you received from the Lord, which, while unwelcome at the time, turned out to be a source of growth for you in some way. Perhaps it was an event that forced you out of your comfortable habits, or some challenge to let go of a certain way of thinking. Can you think of a “gift” which you have been given by God, but which you have not really accepted or used?

December 31

Think of some happy events during the past year that let you experience God's loving kindness. Then think of some events which show that the reign of God is still incomplete (for example sickness, sin, and suffering). Did you experience God's presence during these times as well?

January 1

“So whoever is in Christ is a new [kainos] creation: the old things have passed away; behold new [kainos] things have come” (2 Cor. 5:17). Can you think of something “old,” comfortable, and familiar that the Lord may be asking you to let go of during these holy days in order to make you into an entirely new creation? Will you resist the change? Welcome it? Accept it grudgingly?