

Advent 1

A meditation by The Rev. Cathy George

“Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Collect for Advent, The Book of Common Prayer

Advent arrives offering beauty and light in a dark season. In northern regions Advent arrives when the world goes gray; the muted earth, the slate blue winter sky, black barren trees against the horizon at dusk. Midnight blue, and fiery orange berries on bushes bearing the last of the green foliage are the only pinpoints of color in the late November woods. The lessons from Scripture, the prayers for this season and the rituals of Advent invite us to take a way less traveled through the frenzy of this busiest of seasons. They are “a lantern to our feet and a light upon our path” (Psalm 119) helping us ready ourselves for the birth of the prince of peace.

Advent arrives when neighborhoods grow dark early, and lights go on, ovens bake, fires burn and candles are lit. We mark this four-week season in which we prepare for the birth of Christ with four candles set into a wreath. This tradition finds its origins in the harvest season coming to an end. The wagon wheel fallen from its summer labors now rests at the edge of a frosty field. Brought indoors, turned on its side, covered with pine and berries, the Advent wreath invites us inside. We dispel the darkness with the light of purple, white and pink candles, and the power of the opening collect for Advent: “Cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

We put on the Advent season as armor. The armor of light is spiritual protection against the darkness that falls on us this holiday season when the loss of loved ones stings us; when expectations for love, gifts, romance and family all too quickly disappoint us. The wisdom of God has planted

this season in the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas, those most harried weeks, and we make our way by choosing a pattern of prayer that will carry us through.

Put on the whole armor of prayer. Choose a discipline of prayer as protection against the forces of frantic lists and not enough time. Make a commitment to add one discipline, one that you can easily do, not one that is too hard for you.

You might set aside the morning paper for later in the day, and sit with your morning coffee in the presence of God and read the Psalms appointed for the day. You might choose to sit in silence and meditate for 15 minutes each morning. Maybe you set aside time at noon each weekday and use the noonday office from the prayerbook to find an oasis of peace in the middle of the workday.

Praying at the day’s end before going to bed is the best time for some people. When you pray, close the door to your office or your bedroom, find a place on a park bench or sit in your car, and open your heart to God. Don’t try to become prayerful or holy, be just where you are. Share the burdens and blessings in the day that has passed or is ahead of you; ask for the help you need, pray for those you love. Pray for the world we live in.

Do you walk or run? Dedicate your morning walk as time with God. Do you like to write? Write to God, Jesus or Jesus’ mother Mary once a day this Advent. *The Book of Common Prayer* includes Devotions for an Individual or Family which offer structure for brief, daily prayer in the morning, midday, evening and at the close of the day. If there is no time that

seems possible for you, what about turning off your cell phone or iPod or radio and using your morning commute for prayer in Advent. Choose something you will look forward to, something you want to do, not something you think you should do, and choose an amount of time that will be easy for you to accomplish, not the amount of time you think you should choose. Start with 15 minutes not an hour.

When your very best intentions last a day or two, and you fail in your commitment, don't dwell on the failure, just begin again. Don't waste your time looking back to what you meant to do and did not do. Don't take any interest in the fact that you missed some days, let other things get in the way or skipped it because of the bad mood you were in. Only begin again. You did not do what you intended to do, so you start again. No judgment, no remorse, begin again, leave the judgment to God.

If prayer was something we could buy, it would come with a warning label: you may not experience peace. Stillness can be a region of great uneasiness, particularly when we are not accustomed to it. The quiet reminds us that we haven't scheduled a haircut; we've run out of dog food; the house plants need watering; the light bulb was not replaced. The flood of details presses upon us competing for our attention and knowing how to get it. We hear the compellingly rational voice tell us that if we are going to be effective, and use our time wisely, it is best to propel ourselves forward and get something useful done. Stillness can make us feel more bothered than peaceful.

Simply stay put. The success you are looking for is not a state of peace or bliss, or

rest, but staying in the quiet for the amount of time you said you would. Stay with it. Your success at prayer will not be anything particular that happens while you pray; your success is simply not getting up and quitting. It does not matter if your mind wanders to mundane details. Ask it back. Are you restless? Breathe deeply, and stay where you are. You are not praying in order to accomplish something; you are praying to increase the place within where God dwells, and God accomplishes this in us, we don't. We show up. All we do is to come into God's presence and be there, not as a list maker, or task master, but as a friend of God, resting in God's presence and remembering whose you are. God will take care of the rest.

Prayer brings us face to face with all the switches that we do not control. Doing makes us feel important. It distracts us. When the impulse to run from silence comes over you, sit still. Feel the piston motion inside urging you to rise and tell yourself: "I am sitting still now." Then, sit still.

What spreads out before us is where Advent comes in, the ragged edge of *unaccomplishment* becomes the horizon of a new day. In Advent we wait and watch. The baby is being formed in the womb, perfectly cared for, not ready to be born. Advent is when things are not ready yet, not complete, and we face limitation and loss. When we suffer a loss of any kind, it is an opening for God who will show us how to endure our limitation, whatever it is. If that very chair that you sit in became a wheelchair and you never got up again. If your bed became a hospital bed and there you stayed. Then we hold out our arms to what is beyond us, then we wait for what we cannot initiate or achieve on our own, that hidden and inward shift given to us, born of our limitation. God takes our physical, emotional and

psychological limitations and makes them a tutor of humanity and grace.

The people who know a lot about this gather in rooms with other people to share their limitations and say, “I’m powerless over alcohol,” or anything else. Powerlessness, limitation, in all its forms—death, illness, tragedy, addiction—marks the boundaries of our control and if we allow it, God will shape it to be our tutor.

God is unlimited, eternal, immortal. And God chose limitation, chose our human circumstance. God chose one person, one century, one woman, one womb, and came into the confines of space and time in physical form: one brief life. That brief life of Jesus. God chose a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, who ran off from his parents as an adolescent when he heard another voice beckoning him. He impatiently snapped at his mother’s request for more wine at a wedding reception. He got angry and lost his temper over abuse of the temple. He wept when his friend died. Jesus worked with human hands, helping his dad with a plane and lathe, and a pencil behind his ear. He thought with a human mind that was alert in the morning and tired in the evening. And he loved with a human heart.

Advent draws us into the life of Jesus. Our silence, our prayer, pulls us into our

faith’s indestructible force and center, whose life, death and resurrection hold the keys to an eternity with God. Jesus is there making sense of God for us, giving us a mystery to meet in, praying for us, interceding with us and giving us the protective armor of light.

We sit in the lavender hues of Advent and ask God to “cast away the works of darkness” so that we can put on the armor of light. In Advent, ices crack and shine, and the night sky gleams sublime under unknown stars. In Advent, rose and purple and white grace the edges of God and we fall with the trust of children into billows of drifting snow, and we let go, if only for a moment and become still. And we thank you, God, for the life of Jesus, for the wonder of it, for the power of it, the beauty and glory, the simplicity, the kindness and compassion.

The Rev. Cathy H. George, a pastor and writer who lives in Dorchester, Mass., and Jaffrey, N.H., offers these Advent meditations for the frenzied season when the church is an oasis of peace. She is the priest-in-charge of St. Mary’s Church and St. Mark’s Church in Dorchester.

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