

2010 Advent Retreat in Daily Living
Prayer Material for Week 1: The Promise of Advent

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Ignatian Contemplation of Incarnation

The Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius begins with a beautiful contemplation of the Incarnation. St. Ignatius invites us imagine the Holy Trinity looking out over the world. The Holy Trinity knows the whole world of humankind and sees all of the various ways human beings are suffering and bringing suffering on each other. Ignatius says “they look down upon the whole surface of the earth and behold all nations in great blindness, going down to death and descending into hell.”

Ignatius invites us to enter into the heart of God as God looks at the world. What goes on in the heart of the Trinity as they look at the darkness of the world? Ignatius invites us to feel the Trinity’s love for humanity and their pain at our suffering. And he invites us to see and hear the Trinity’s response to that pain: how out of that incredible love for humanity, out of God’s infinite and eternal love, God thinks, “Let us save all these people.” And Jesus says, “I’ll go.” And so the Father decides to send the Son down to enter into the world, to become human for the sake of our salvation.

Accept Ignatius’ invitation to enter into the heart of the God. Be with the Trinity as they look at the darkness of the world. Hear their response.

As part of your prayer, you may want to sit with a reflection coming out of this prayer exercise written by Michael Moynahan, S.J. The reflection, written as a message by the Trinity to us, starts by talking about how little we understood the ways in which God sought to convey God’s love to us, how notwithstanding all God tried to do, we grew distant, deaf and blind to God. It then expresses God’s next move in a simple, homey way:

*And so we did
what families do
when confronted with calamity.
We drew straws.
Shorty lost.
He came to share
your plight,
your fight,
your night,
and point you
toward tomorrow.*

Isaiah 25:6-9

Isaiah is one of the great prophets of Advent, a man invited by God to speak His word, to tell the people what it is that God wants from them. To challenge the people to be more than they have been.

There is a particular passage in Isaiah that holds a special place in my heart, that fills me with hope and confidence. It is the promise that, notwithstanding all the suffering and all the tears, God ultimately will make all things well.

Today I invite you to simply sit with the promise of these words:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples
A feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.
On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples,
The web that is woven over all nations; he will destroy death forever.
The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces;
The reproach of his people he will remove from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken.
On that day it will be said: "Behold our God, to whom we looked to save us!
This is the Lord for whom we looked; let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us!"*

Don't just read the words. Close your eyes and hear them spoken to you. Hear the promise contained in them. Hear God's promise and feel God's love.

Isaiah 9:1-6, 11:1-9

The Book of Isaiah opens with what is called the Book of Judgment – a scathing indictment of the people of Israel. It is a long and bitter attack on the arrogance and hypocrisy of Jerusalem’s leaders. In the second verse, God says, “Sons have I raised and reared, but they have disowned me!” And immediately thereafter, God laments: “Ah! sinful nation, people laden with wickedness, evil race, corrupt children! They have forsaken the Lord.” And God tells his people, “Your incense is loathsome to me...I close my eyes to you.”

But as harsh as the indictments are, God cannot sustain them consistently. Even in the first chapter of Isaiah, which contains all of the lines I just shared, God also invites: “Come now, let us set things right...Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow.”

And how will God set things right? By sending His Son to live among us, the Son who “shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted.”

Sit with one or both of the following passages reflecting on what it means to us that God has incarnated in history. As you sit with the words describing the rule of Immanuel ask yourself: What is my place in this promise? And how will I usher in the rule of Immanuel?

Isaiah 9: 1-6

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing.... For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!

Isaiah 11

*A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
A spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord.
Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide,
But he shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's afflicted.
He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.
Then the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the cobra's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.*

Micah 4:1-7

Micah is another of the great prophets of the Old Testament and a contemporary of Isaiah. His book has a structure that bears some resemblance to the book of Isaiah. In the first three chapters of his book, Micah announces God's judgment upon Jerusalem for the sins of its evil rulers, false prophets, and immoral priests. Those who were supposed to be leaders, instead led the people of Israel to lives of impure worship and social injustice. As a result, they face punishment by God for their sins.

But in Chapter 4 of Micah, we hear of God's promised restoration. Sit today with these words from that chapter:

In days to come the mount of the Lord's house shall be established higher than the mountains; it shall rise high above the hills, and peoples shall stream to it. Many nations shall come, and say, "Come, let us climb the mount of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may instruct us in his ways, that we may walk in his paths." For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples and impose terms on strong and distant nations. They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. Every man shall sit under his own vine or under his own fig tree, undisturbed; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. For all the peoples walk each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord, our God, forever and ever. On that day, says the Lord, I will gather the lame, and I will assemble the outcasts, and those whom I have afflicted. I will make of the lame a remnant, and of those driven far off a strong nation, and the Lord shall be king over them on Mount Zion, from now on forever.

As with the passages from Isaiah, sit with the prophet's description of God's promise, asking yourself:

What does it mean that God promises restoration rather than punishment?

What is my place in this promise? How will I help usher it in?

Malachi 3:1, 23-24

Although Malachi is not a prophet we hear much about and is classified as one of the minor prophets, he is the last of the prophets and his is the last book of the Old Testament. With him, the prophets are described as “concluding” their task.

Here are the two passages from Malachi that are proclaimed at Catholic Mass every December 23:

Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; and suddenly there will come to the temple, the Lord whom you see,, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes...to turn the hearts of fathers and their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.

Malachi 3:23-24

Consider the longing of the people of Israel, who for 400 years have felt that the heavens were closed to them. Feel their sense of abandonment and their longing.

Then spend some time with these passages from Malachi, which express God’s hopes and promise to his people and God’s preparation of his people for the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus.

Luke 1:68-79

Spend time today with the words of Zechariah's canticle (Luke 1:67-79). Experience what Zechariah and his hearers felt as they contemplated God's promise and its impending fulfillment.

*Blessed be the Lord,
The God of Israel;
He has come to His people and set them free.*

*He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
Born of the house of His servant David.*

*Through His holy prophets He promised of old
That He would save us from our enemies,
From the hands of all who hate us.*

*He promised to show mercy to our fathers
And to remember His holy Covenant.*

*This was the oath He swore to our father Abraham:
To set us free from the hands of our enemies,
Free to worship Him without fear,
Holy and righteous in His sight
All the days of our life.*

*You, My child shall be called
The prophet of the Most High,
For you will go before the Lord to prepare His way,
To give his people knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins.*

*In the tender compassion of our Lord
The dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness
And the shadow of death,
And to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

John 1:1-9

On this last day of the week, we return to our starting point for the week: the existence of Jesus at the beginning of time – before the Incarnation, indeed, before the entry of sin into the world.

Rest in John's words today. Read them slowly. Hear them. Listen to what they have to say to you.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race;
the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.
The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*