



Bringing Home the Word

First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2018

Change for God's Creation

By Mary Katharine Deeley

We begin this Church year as we left the last one—with a description of the signs that will come before Christ appears. But where Mark warns of the coming judgment for the enemies of God, Luke, with great subtlety, shifts the focus so people will hear the hope of salvation. “Stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand,” he calls out (Luke 21:28). At the end of the Church year, we meditate on Christ's coming in glory to judge the living and the dead. In the beginning, we remember the Incarnation: God's emptying himself to

become fully human and come into the world. Both actions are heralded by, and will mean great change for, us and for God's creation.

Change happens when God breaks into the world, regardless of the time. In account after account in the Bible, we watch as God visits people and changes their names (Abraham and Peter), their lives (Jeremiah, the apostles, the woman at the well), and heals their separation and brokenness (the blind man, the paralytic, and Lazarus). Also, sinners are punished (the rich man and Jezebel) and landscapes are altered (Isaiah's vision of valleys lifted up and mountains laid low). This saving action continues throughout history, especially within the Church and among the saints.

Advent is a time to remember that Christ came to change the world and each of us. Have we allowed ourselves to be changed? Are we willing to be shaped by the hand of God, called by a different name, and given a place in Christ's mission? Let's hope so because, ready or not, here he comes. +

*Change happens when
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regardless of the time.*

A Word from Pope Francis

Christmas is near, the signs of his approach are evident along our streets and in our houses....These outward signs invite us to welcome the Lord who always comes and knocks at our door, knocks at our heart, in order to draw near to us.

—Angelus, December 11, 2016



Sunday Readings

Jeremiah 33:14–16

I will make a just shoot spring up for David; he shall do what is right and just in the land.

1 Thessalonians 3:12—4:2

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

[Jesus said,] “They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



- Am I open to accepting the changes that God wants to bring to my life?
- How has the coming of Christ changed the world?

Connecting the Dots

By Richard Rohr, OFM

In this space we often discuss the great themes of Scripture. Though the point may seem obvious, this is a good time to emphasize that the Bible is more than a series of unrelated inspired stories or a collection of helpful lessons to live by. Biblical revelation invites us into an utterly new experience, and the wonderful thing is that human consciousness is ready for it—perhaps more than ever.

Remember the connect-the-dots activities found in the coloring books of our youth? When we had finished drawing in the lines and making all the connections, we suddenly saw something we hadn't seen before. So it is with the Bible: Its themes have coherence about them, offering something good and new. That is what the word of God is meant to be.

In many ways this gift is more important than ever. We live at a time when voices are telling us that nothing has meaning, there are no big patterns. We cannot thrive in such a universe. As we know, the soul needs meaning like the body needs food. The soul must have meaning to flourish and live with safety. What true biblical revelation gives us is coherence in the face of seeming incoherence.



As children, most of us learned the story about Adam and Eve. The Garden is the symbol of unitive consciousness where we cannot separate from God. Whatever our journeys outward from there, they eventually lead us back to the center to find who we really are, to find ourselves in God.

God at the Center

We come to see this as the end point of the Bible, where at last in this marvelous doctrine that we call the Trinity we have this mystery of mutual indwelling: God in us and we in God; God in human history and history finding itself in God. There is no separation anymore.

Saint Paul addresses this idea of mutual indwelling in Colossians 3:4: “When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.” In his Letter to the Galatians (2:19–20), Paul writes: “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God.”

What God is doing throughout the Bible is creating people who are capable of encounter, of being present. The whole movement of the Bible leads us toward ever greater incarnation, ever deeper indwelling. The last book of the Bible ends in the holy city with the river of

life flowing through it (Revelation 21). Here we have a final image of mutual indwelling: We live in God and God lives in us. And we dare to believe that it could be true.

The Ultimate Question

Recall an early scene from John's Gospel (1:38–39) that sums up much of the good news. Jesus encounters two of his disciples walking along the lake and asks them what they want. I believe that is what God is asking us: What do we really want? They replied with another question, asking Jesus where he lived.

This is the ultimate spiritual question: Where do you live? Who are you? The answer, of course, is that we are sons and daughters of God. Jesus invited his disciples to follow him, and they stayed with him for the rest of that day. This is Jesus' invitation and his gift. This is what the Bible is finally calling us to. +

PRAYER

Lord, help me to slow down and become more aware of my rushing aimlessly from place to place. Quiet my mind and steady my heart that I may live in your presence throughout the day.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 3–8

Monday, St. Francis Xavier:
Is 2:1–5 / Mt 8:5–11

Tuesday, Advent Weekday:
Is 11:1–10 / Lk 10:21–24

Wednesday, Advent Weekday:
Is 25:6–10a / Mt 15:29–37

Thursday, Advent Weekday:
Is 26:1–6 / Mt 7:21, 24–27

Friday, St. Ambrose: Is 29:17–24 / Mt 9:27–31

Saturday, Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Gn 3:9–15, 20 / Eph 1:3–6, 11–12 / Lk 1:26–38



Bringing Home the Word

Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018

Get Ready to Invite Jesus In

By Mary Katharine Deeley

One of the most memorable questions I have ever been asked came during a conversation with a spiritual director. During my marriage-preparation retreat, he asked about the upcoming wedding. I told him about all the preparations and how I felt I was on top of things. He gently asked, “I know you’re prepared, but are you ready?” It was the first time I really thought about the difference. We were certainly prepared. The flowers had been ordered, the ceremony set, and the caterer knew exactly what we wanted. We were in control. But being ready for the great

unknown of marriage, a lifelong vocation, was another thing altogether. Being ready suggested that we won’t always be in control and that, no matter what happens, we were in it for life and would face whatever comes together.

The prophet Isaiah describes the one (John the Baptist) who prepares the way of the Lord. He will do this by preaching to and baptizing those who come to him. The preparation for the coming Messiah is in his hands. He poses the question, “Are you ready for the one who is to come?” Thinking beyond our religious practices and Christmas preparations, what does that really mean for us? Maybe this year it means looking into our own hearts for the longing for Christ. Perhaps we’ll make room for him in our busy lives and our busier thoughts. We might even stop our preparations long enough to remember just who is coming and invite him in. Are you ready? +

Sunday Readings

Baruch 5:1–9

Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on forever the splendor of glory from God.

Philippians 1:4–6, 8–11

And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception.

Luke 3:1–6

[The prophet Isaiah wrote,]
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.”

*We were in control. But
being ready for the great
unknown of marriage was
another thing altogether.*

A Word from Pope Francis

The Immaculate Conception leads us to contemplate Our Lady who, by unique privilege, was preserved from original sin from the very moment of her conception. Even living in a world marked by sin, she was not touched by it: Mary is our sister in suffering, but not in evil or in sin.

—Angelus, Solemnity of
the Immaculate
Conception,
December 8, 2015



REFLECTION QUESTIONS



- Am I able to give up some control in life to follow God’s plan for me?
- Have I taken a break in Christmas preparations and searched my heart for a longing for Christ?

Why Truth Is Sacred

By Kathy Coffey

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16).

Aunt Martha sports a hideous new dress that accentuates her bulges. What do you say? Perhaps you cop out: “Fuschia is certainly your color!” Maybe you describe the hidden reality: “You’re so cheerful!” But in this case the truth, “That’s the ugliest dress I’ve ever seen,” is cruel. Even the most honest person wouldn’t insult his or her aunt.

The example may oversimplify the complex situations in which we find ourselves today. We’ve recently seen deception by people we have placed our trust in. Countries go to war based on wobbly intelligence. Priests with a history of child abuse have been placed in parishes without sufficient concern for the need to protect possible new victims.

But we can’t point our fingers at others until we turn it on ourselves. As children we may have figured out that small lies were OK, as long as we didn’t get caught. As adolescents we learned to protect our fragile egos by broadcasting the positives and concealing the negatives about ourselves. As adults we struggle to maintain a balance between privacy and intimacy. We don’t want to “tell all” as on a talk show. But we also know that those we love deserve the full truth about



ourselves, even when it’s painful to reveal.

The Whole Truth

Here are two examples. Brendan is the life of the party, an Irish storyteller. No one minds when he exaggerates; it makes the stories better. Unfortunately, that strategy carries into his personal life. His ideas about himself grow grandiose and far from reality, but sadly, he believes them. Brendan gets caught up in the fiction. He always stars in the latest exploit. But by now, no one is sure it really happened.

Molly, on the other hand, gives flesh to the saying, “She knows who she is.” People needing an honest opinion count on her to give it. She trusts them with the truth because she believes they can handle it. She openly admits that she’s done her time in therapy. Without boring people too much, she’ll explain that alcohol is poison for her system. She knows her dark side as well as her assets and conveys a hard-won authenticity.

So this business of truth-telling gets more complex than Aunt Martha’s dress. The biblical origins of our tradition show why truth is revered as sacred.

Jesus, Our Model

The perfect example of inner solidity comes from Jesus. When the soldiers approach him in the Garden of Olives,

he doesn’t hide. In fact, he initiates the conversation: “Whom are you looking for?” When they answer, “Jesus the Nazorean,” he says simply, “I AM” (John 18:4–5). What if Jesus had fudged? Suspecting what was ahead, he could have said, “Oh no, you’ve got the wrong guy. I just look like him.” He might have escaped. Instead, he stands in his truth, despite what that will cost.

What does Jesus model for us? When, like Brendan, we create myths about ourselves to impress others, we deny what is far more wonderful about us: our likeness to God. When we perpetuate the falsehoods of advertising, we prefer appearance to reality. When we tolerate phoniness, we refuse God the praise that even a blade of grass or an honest dandelion can give.

Thomas Merton says that our response to God’s initial word is to become God’s words: God’s answer and echo. To do that, we must hone our words to the most honest, accurate ones we can find. Thus, we honor the Eighth Commandment. +



Lord, you are always patient with me and do great things for me. Teach me to be more patient in life and grateful for all that has been given to me.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 10–15

Monday, Advent Weekday:
Is 35:1–10 / Lk 5:17–26

Tuesday, Advent Weekday:
Is 40:1–11 / Mt 18:12–14

Wednesday, Our Lady of Guadalupe:
Zec 2:14–17 or Rv 11:19a; 12:1–6a, 10ab /
Lk 1:26–38 or Lk 1:39–47

Thursday, St. Lucy:
Is 41:13–20 / Mt 11:11–15

Friday, St. John of the Cross:
Is 48:17–19 / Mt 11:16–19

Saturday, Advent Weekday:
Sir 48:1–4, 9–11 / Mt 17:9a, 10–13



Bringing Home the Word

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018

Preparing for the Living Water of Christ

By Mary Katharine Deeley

I love waterfalls. When I'm out hiking, I'll take any side path that leads to a waterfall. The first time I swam in a waterfall pool was memorable. I'm not sure where this love came from, but there is something about the motion and sound of the water as it's falling that soothes my mind and enlivens my soul. I also know that waterfalls can be dangerous: The force of the water can sweep everything over the edge. Still, when Jesus refers to his living water in the encounter with the woman at the well (John 4), I immediately think

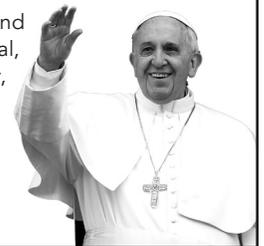
of water falling into a pool and the abundant life that grows around the area.

For Christians, water signifies both life and death. At creation, God said, "Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures" (Genesis 1:20). God then used the waters of a flood to destroy wickedness on earth (while saving Noah and others). Water washes us clean and keeps us alive. On a recent trip to Israel, I had an opportunity to stand in the Jordan River and renew my own baptismal vows. I was struck by the power of the words and the coolness of the water. It also occurred to me that simply renewing my vows was not enough. Our promise, inherent in the Creed, is that we will live a life transformed by grace with the help of the Holy Spirit. That is both comforting and challenging. But Jesus, who is living water, whose Spirit brings us life and whose fire is ready to purify and make us ready, is with us now and forever. +

A Word from Pope Francis

Let us implore from on high the gift of commitment to the cause of peace. Peace in our homes, our families, our schools and our communities. Peace in all those places where war never seems to end. Peace for those faces which have known nothing but pain. Peace throughout this world...Simply PEACE.

Address at Ground
Zero Memorial,
New York City,
September 25,
2015



Sunday Readings

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Do not fear, Zion, do not be discouraged! The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior.

Philippians 4:4-7

The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything...make your requests known to God.

Luke 3:10-18

[John said,] "I am baptizing you with water...He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire."

*There is something about the
motion and sound of falling
water that soothes my mind
and enlivens my soul.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS REFLECTION

- Do I regularly attend Mass to experience Jesus' living water?
- Can I make time to celebrate baptismal anniversaries as well as family birthdays?

A New Way of Seeing

By Kathy Coffey

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

In the northern parts of the country, winter makes the land bleak and brown. As spring makes its gradual entrance, trees and grass reach deep into their roots for nurture. Perhaps it is like that with belief. When our lives seem wintry, people of faith grip the bedrock and, from that common core, surge into new life. We reach down into roots sunk so deep in tradition we cannot see their source. But we know they are there. We count on them for life.

If we try to go it alone, we quickly discover our impoverishment. To ignore God's graciousness is to risk condemnation. To count on grace is to take our place among the great ones who went before us.

While we may amuse ourselves with fantasies of martyrdom, we all face less dramatic Calvaries. The irritating colleague, the whiny child, the boring job, the repetitive housework, the chemotherapy, or the long commute: All represent places to which Christ calls us, the arenas where belief becomes action.

Do we believe the little stuff of our life can help shape us for greatness? Or do we relegate holiness to apostles and saints,



centuries ago? Just as we can neglect belief, we may mistakenly distance the grace of baptism to our past. But we can draw on baptism's power today. Any gardener knows that deep-rooted plants need water. So too the baptismal symbols offer a fresh start, full of potential and vigor.

Sharpened Vision

When we bring that symbolism into each day, we discover that we are washed not only in water, but in a new way of seeing. On a natural plane, we can all appreciate the yearning for rain after drought or a hot shower after dirty work. Jesus referred to himself as an exuberant fountain quenching our thirst: "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink" (John 7:37).

The postbaptismal anointing is an ancient act of strengthening. In the fourth century, St. Ambrose described the attraction of fragrant oils: "We shall run following the perfume of your robes." If the perfume industry can capitalize on lovely scents, Christians can recognize more profound overtones: We are marked with the symbol of God's beauty.

We who fret over problems at 3 AM know they become less formidable in the daylight. On his deathbed, the blind writer Goethe pleaded, "More light!" Jesus addresses our dread of darkness:

"While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5). One gift of baptism is the presentation of a burning candle with the words: "Receive the light of Christ."

Clothed in Christ

We know the difference clothing can make and how we feel when a new shirt rates a compliment. Garment imagery runs throughout Scripture, where we read: "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

A name change in Scripture signaled a new person (Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, Cephas to Peter). So our baptismal name gives us a new identity in Christ. We know the security of the Good Shepherd calling us by name. The Book of Revelation adds, "On him I will inscribe the name of my God" (3:12).

The gifts of baptism renew our best selves so we can get on with the business of recreating the world. Energized by shared beliefs that root us firmly, by symbols that ground our identity, we can focus on dreams and hopes, not fears and anxieties. +



Lord, you are generous and kind to all your people. Instill within me a compassionate and generous heart, so I may respond to my poor sisters and brothers near and far away.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 17–22

Monday, Advent Weekday:
Gn 49:2, 8–10 / Mt 1:1–17

Tuesday, Advent Weekday:
Jer 23:5–8 / Mt 1:18–25

Wednesday, Advent Weekday:
Jgs 13:2–7, 24–25a / Lk 1:5–25

Thursday, Advent Weekday:
Is 7:10–14 / Lk 1:26–38

Friday, Advent Weekday:
Sg 2:8–14 or Zep 3:14–18a / Lk 1:39–45

Saturday, Advent Weekday:
1 Sm 1:24–28 / Lk 1:46–56



Bringing Home the Word

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2018

Time for Joy: The Lord's Coming

By Mary Katharine Deeley

Not long ago, I had the great opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Israel with a group. We began our journey each day in prayer. We visited many holy sites; we walked where Jesus walked. Each day our chaplain celebrated the liturgy in one of the many churches that mark the location of significant stories in the Bible: where Jesus was born, where he died, where he celebrated his first miracle at Cana. The prayer was profound, and the members of the group quickly became friends. We

still greet each other with gladness and affection.

One of the more moving experiences was a visit to the Church of the Visitation. Located at the top of a small hill, the church welcomes visitors with a wide plaza and a wrought-iron entryway. Immediately to the right of the courtyard is a tall bronze statue of Mary and Elizabeth greeting each other. The figures are slender and visibly pregnant. The artist captured their joy with a slight arch in their backs, their arms beginning to ascend, and their heads lifted up as though laughing in delight. The statue made us smile.

I think about that statue now and believe this is how we should always greet the Lord—with delight, joy, and an understanding that we are pregnant with his grace and presence. We are called to reveal that presence to the whole world. In these last few days before Christmas, reflect on the ways you will show your joy in the Lord's coming. +

Sunday Readings

Micah 5:1–4a

He shall take his place as shepherd by the strength of the LORD...
And they shall dwell securely.

Hebrews 10:5–10

When he came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me."

Luke 1:39–45

[Elizabeth cried out,] "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

A Word from Pope Francis

Jesus keeps knocking on our doors, the doors of our lives. He doesn't do this by magic, with special effects, with flashing lights and fireworks. Jesus keeps knocking on our door in the faces of our brothers and sisters, in the faces of our neighbors, in the faces of those at our side.

—Meeting the homeless,
Washington, DC,
September 24,
2015



REFLECTION
QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS
REFLECTION

*Greet the Lord with delight,
understanding that we are
pregnant with his grace
and presence.*

- At Christmas, how will I show my joy at the Lord's coming?
- How can I express this delight to family and acquaintances?

Why Did Jesus Come?

By Michael D. Guinan, OFM

It happened years ago on Christmas. As the parishioners left church after Mass, a woman approached me, all smiles, and said, “This is such a beautiful feast! I’m not sure exactly why God did it, but I certainly am glad!”

The Incarnation, from the Latin for “flesh” (*caro/carnis*), affirms the “enfleshment” of the Word of God. This doctrine, which is at the center of our Christian faith, upholds the mystery that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, is one divine person but possesses both a divine and a human nature. As it turns out, we do have some idea why God did it.

The Creed tells us that the Incarnation was “for us and for our salvation.” Before the birth of Jesus, Joseph is told that Mary will bear a son and “you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). It is the incarnate Jesus who then saves or delivers us from the condition of sin and death.

But can this be the whole story? Does the Incarnation really depend on sin? It would seem that the Word of God became human not because of sin, but rather because God wanted Christ to be the most perfect work of creation, the goal and direction of creation.

Overflowing Love

In a real sense, the Incarnation is



connected with the very life of the Trinity. The inner life of God is a life of ever-giving love. The second person, the Son, is at the center of this flow of love. God freely chooses to let this love overflow outside; creation flows out of this fountain of divine goodness. Here too, the incarnated Son stands at the center as the

focus of God’s outpouring love and the one capable of directing and returning that love back to God.

The prologue to St. John’s Gospel affirms that the Word was in the beginning before all things; that all things were created through him and that this Word became flesh in our midst (1:1–18). The hymn in St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians is similar: He (the incarnate Jesus) is before all things; all things were created in him and for him; in him all things hold together (1:15–20; see also Ephesians 1:3–14).

In other words, everything that exists is always in relationship to the Father, through Christ, and in the Spirit. Because of sin, the Incarnation took the form and shape that it did, but the Incarnation itself is primary.

Viewing the Incarnation this way can help us to appreciate and share the insight of St. Francis of Assisi: All parts of creation—sun, moon, stars, air, water, animals, people—are our brothers and

sisters, children in Christ of the one Creator God. Each creature is a unique embodiment and reflection of God deserving our care and respect.

Aesthetic Adventure

It is only in this light that we can recognize sin and brokenness as a disfiguring of the beauty of creation. Through sin we are like the deranged man in Rome who took a hammer to Michelangelo’s statue, the *Pietà*. The Incarnation delivers us from sin, but in so doing it restores the goodness and beauty of creation intended from the beginning. In our living the Christian life, we are embarked on an aesthetic adventure: to live the beauty of the Incarnation.

The woman on that Christmas years ago spoke more truth than she realized. It is indeed a beautiful feast, but we do have some idea why God did it. And we—each of us and all creation—are certainly glad! +



*Lord, your Word gives me life,
joy, hope, and peace.
May your Word find a home in me
and inspire me to live a life
rooted in gospel values.*

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 24–29

Monday, Advent Weekday:
2 Sm 7:1–5, 8b–12, 14a, 16 / Lk 1:67–79

Tuesday, Christmas: Is 52:7–10 /
Heb 1:1–6 / Jn 1:1–18 or Jn 1:1–5, 9–14

Wednesday, St. Stephen:
Acts 6:8–10; 7:54–59 / Mt 10:17–22

Thursday, St. John:
1 Jn 1:1–4 / Jn 20:1a, 2–8

Friday, the Holy Innocents:
1 Jn 1:5–2:2 / Mt 2:13–18

Saturday, Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas: 1 Jn 2:3–11 / Lk 2:22–35



Bringing Home the Word

The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph
December 30, 2018

The Holy Family's Example for All Families

By Mary Katharine Deeley

An old joke portrays an Irish couple with several children listening to the priest extolling the obedience of Jesus, the patience of Mary and Joseph, and exhorting his congregation to be just like them. When the Mass was ended, the couple turned to each other and one muttered to the other, "Sure to heaven, they were patient—they and their one." The joke highlights one struggle for many parents: keeping patience while children learn the lessons of life. It's a

Sunday Readings

Sirach 3:2–6, 12–14

Those who honor their father atone for sins; they store up riches who respect their mother.

Colossians 3:12–21

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

Luke 2:41–52

[Jesus said,] "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

job that may seem easier with one than with many.

Today, though, the Holy Family offers an example that applies to all families, whether large or small. Since Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph knew that one day he was going to have to follow his own path. They couldn't choose it for him; they could only prepare him as best they could. After they found him in the Temple and he told them, "I must be in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49), which can also be translated as "I must be about my Father's work", they knew he was growing into adulthood and that his time was coming. However, Jesus returned with them because it was not yet time for him to leave, and he remains obedient to them as he always is to his heavenly Father.

All of us who are parents know that we cannot dictate what our children can or should be. We can only help them discern what God has called them to be. In the meantime, we give them the best foundation we can give by praying with them, talking to them, and modeling our own response to God's call. +

*Mary and Joseph knew
they could only prepare Jesus
to follow his own path.*

A Word from Pope Francis

Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod's implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless.

—*Amoris Laetitia*,
March 19, 2016



REFLECTION QUESTIONS



- As a parent, am I doing all I can to help my children discern God's calling?
- Instead of "helicoptering," do I give my children the space to discover their own paths?

How to Really Forgive

By Fr. William H. Shannon

If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:14–15).

Every day I say a prayer at least seven times which, if I truly thought about its full meaning, would scare me half to death. I say the Lord's Prayer, in which I ask God to treat me the way I treat others. I suspect—though don't like to admit it—that I secretly hope that God will treat me much better than I treat others.

I'm not a nasty person; at least I don't think I am. But there are times when I treat others rather shabbily, times when I find it hard to forgive. Oh, I can go through the external motions of being gingerly polite, but rancor may still be in my heart. So let's admit it: It takes courage to say the Lord's Prayer.

In this text from Matthew that we are reflecting on, Jesus is blunt: If you forgive, God will forgive you. If you don't forgive, God won't forgive you. That's it. Forgive, or else.

What does Jesus mean by such strong words? First, let's be clear about what he doesn't mean. He doesn't mean that ours is a God of retaliation, a God who tells us, "I'll show you. If you don't forgive



I will get even. I won't forgive you either." The God Jesus reveals loves us and continues to love us, no matter what we do.

The point Jesus is making is more subtle. He is telling us that God, much as God might want to do so, cannot forgive us if we don't forgive others. He is telling us that forgiveness cannot be received by an unforgiving heart.

Receptive Hearts

Outside my office window is a cement sidewalk. I think to myself: *How nice it would be if I could look out and, instead of seeing slabs of concrete, encounter a colorful group of lovely flowers growing in the middle of that space.* I might even ask a friend with a green thumb to plant such flowers there for me. Alas, as much as he might want to please me, it's impossible for my friend to do so. The concrete is too hard to receive the roots of the flowers.

Likewise, a hardened heart can be no more open to forgiveness than concrete is to flower seeds. We need to have our hardened hearts softened and opened by God's grace so that God's loving forgiveness can flow into us, then through us to others.

Gift of Tears

Do you remember the story of the Israelites in the desert protesting to Moses that they have no water? God ordered Moses to strike a huge rock with his staff and, behold, water gushed forth in abundance. Early Church writers often prayed for the gift of tears that would open their hearts and enable them to receive God's loving forgiveness.

In *The Roman Missal* there is a beautiful "Mass for the Forgiveness of Sins," known more colloquially as the "Mass for the Gift of Tears." The opening prayer is strikingly beautiful:

Almighty and most gentle God, who brought forth from the rock a fountain of living water for your thirsty people, bring forth, we pray, from the hardness of our heart, tears of sorrow, that we may lament our sins and merit forgiveness from your mercy.

The situation may well arise when this lovely prayer will prove to be helpful for any of us. +



Lord, through your Word we receive the knowledge and wisdom of God. May your Spirit lead me to your sacred Word and guide me in my search for knowledge and truth.

—From *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas*, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

December 31–January 5

Monday, Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas: 1 Jn 2:18–21 / Jn 1:1–18

Tuesday, Solemnity of Mary: Nm 6:22–27 / Gal 4:4–7 / Lk 2:16–21

Wednesday, Sts. Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen: 1 Jn 2:22–28 / Jn 1:19–28

Thursday, Christmas Weekday:

1 Jn 2:29–3:6 / Jn 1:29–34

Friday, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton:

1 Jn 3:7–10 / Jn 1:35–42

Saturday, St. John Neumann:

1 Jn 3:11–21 / Jn 1:43–51