

WELCOMING CHRIST INTO OUR HEARTS

As we prepare to open our hearts anew to Christ this Christmas, let us hold a deep sense of the infinite and unconditional love that God is offering to each of us and everyone else in the human family everyone. May we also come to understand better that accepting the love of God calls us to see his face in everyone we meet and to love them as God loves them.

Loving is always risky, because we cannot enter into it without being changed. Altered. Transformed. In the face of this, we might well ask, Do I really want this? Loving is never just about opening our heart. It is about being willing to have our heart become larger as we make room for people and stories and experiences we never imagined holding. It is about being willing to have our heart become deeper as we move beyond the surface layers of our assumptions, prejudices, and habits in order to truly see and receive what – and who – is before us. It is about being willing to have our heart continually shattered and remade as we take in not only the brokenness of the world but also the beauty of it, the astounding wonder that will not allow us to remain the same.

Jan Richardson, from *Sanctuary of Women*,
A Women's Christmas Retreat 2019 www.janrichardson.com

PRAYER

Lord, as we wait during this Advent season,
let us remember the one who is full of patience,
who is not afraid of silence,
who does not jostle for attention.
Who slipped into Bethlehem one night, mostly unnoticed;
who lived thirty years without headlines or hurry;
who frequently took time alone with his patient father;
who waited for the right time to become the suffering servant;
who stood quietly before the noise of his accusers;
whose silence overpowered their words;
who died, then rose again on a quiet Sunday morning.
Who patiently waits for us
and who longs for us to do the same. Amen.

Author unknown

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, fill my heart with your goodness.
Dwell in me and let me know your peace.
Enter into the dark places of my life
that I may overflow with your love
and reflect your forgiveness,
bringing forth the fruits of love, hope, joy and peace.

Henri Nouwen, from *The Little Book of Advent*

WATCHING AND WAITING ADVENT: A SEASON OF HOPE, PEACE, JOY AND LOVE



INTRODUCTION

Advent provides a time of stillness in the calendar of the Church's year for us to watch and wait, a time to make ourselves ready to welcome the Christ child on Christmas morning who brings the gifts of hope, peace, joy and love.

SLOW DOWN AND LISTEN

In our busy, stressful world, we have to seek out silence and stillness consciously. God speaks in all sorts of ways – through scripture, through nature, through other people. However, unless we slow down and listen, we miss his promptings and his voice. Only then can we truly appreciate the value of the journey, as well as the destination; the value of slowing down, looking and listening; learning from the rhythms of nature; from the formation of community along the way, and from times of stillness and rest.

So often we rush through life at breakneck speed, never pausing to reflect and be still. It is only when we slow down and look that we really see. By slowing down, and being more present to each moment, all sorts of lessons are learned.

For some people, this might involve the healing of painful memories. For others, it could be time to discern the next stage in life. For many, it is a chance to really get away and listen to God. For me, it is an invitation to a whole way of being – one that recognises that God is not 'out there' to be sought, but already 'in here' to be found.

Annie O'Connor, from *The Camino: Finding Stillness and Presence*

HOPE: WAITING AND WATCHING

Waiting is essential to the spiritual life. But waiting as a disciple of Jesus is not empty waiting. It is waiting with a promise in our hearts that makes already present what we are waiting for. We are always waiting, but it is waiting in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps. As we wait, we remember him for whom we are waiting, and as we remember Him we create a community ready to welcome him when he comes.

Henri Nouwen, from *Bread for the Journey*

PEACE: ADVENT CREDO

[use alternate voices for each part]

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful counsellor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

Allan Boesak, from *Walking on Thorns*

JOY: A BLESSING WE MAKE TOGETHER

The joy that animates the characters of Advent and Christmas is something distinctly other than a personal joy they have kept for themselves. This is the joy that infuses creation. They know that joy is what becomes possible when we turn toward one another; that it is a blessing we make together.

When Elizabeth calls out in welcome to Mary, and the child she is carrying leaps with joy; when Mary raises her voice in the Magnificat; when Zechariah sings his canticle; when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple, and the prophets Anna and Simeon cry out in recognition and delight – each one radiates the joy that courses through them; something they have embraced, not by resisting the world but by entering more deeply into it, so that they can welcome the God who shows up in the midst of it.

Jan Richardson, from *Curious about Joy*,

A Women's Christmas Retreat, 2024 www.janrichardson.com

BE FILLED WITH JOY

Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter—and joy.

God, who is forever pouring out God's whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God's creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing.

And God says, Please, my child, help me. Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion. And you know what, my child? As you do this—hey, presto—you discover joy. Joy, which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as almost the reward for this non-self-regarding caring for others.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, from *The Book of Joy*

LOVE

1 John 4:7, 8, 15, 16

My dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. When someone acknowledges that Jesus is the son of God, God remains in him and he in God. We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in him.

Pope Francis

A God who draws near out of love walks with His people, and this walk comes to an unimaginable point. We could never have imagined that the same Lord would become one of us and walk with us, be present with us, present in His Church, present in the Eucharist, present in His Word, present in the poor. He is present, walking with us. And this is closeness: the shepherd close to his flock, close to his sheep, whom he knows, one by one.