

The Journey of Advent: To Hasten toward God's Love

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Almighty and merciful God,
may no earthly undertaking hinder those
who set out in haste to meet your Son,
but may our learning of heavenly wisdom
gain us admittance to his company.

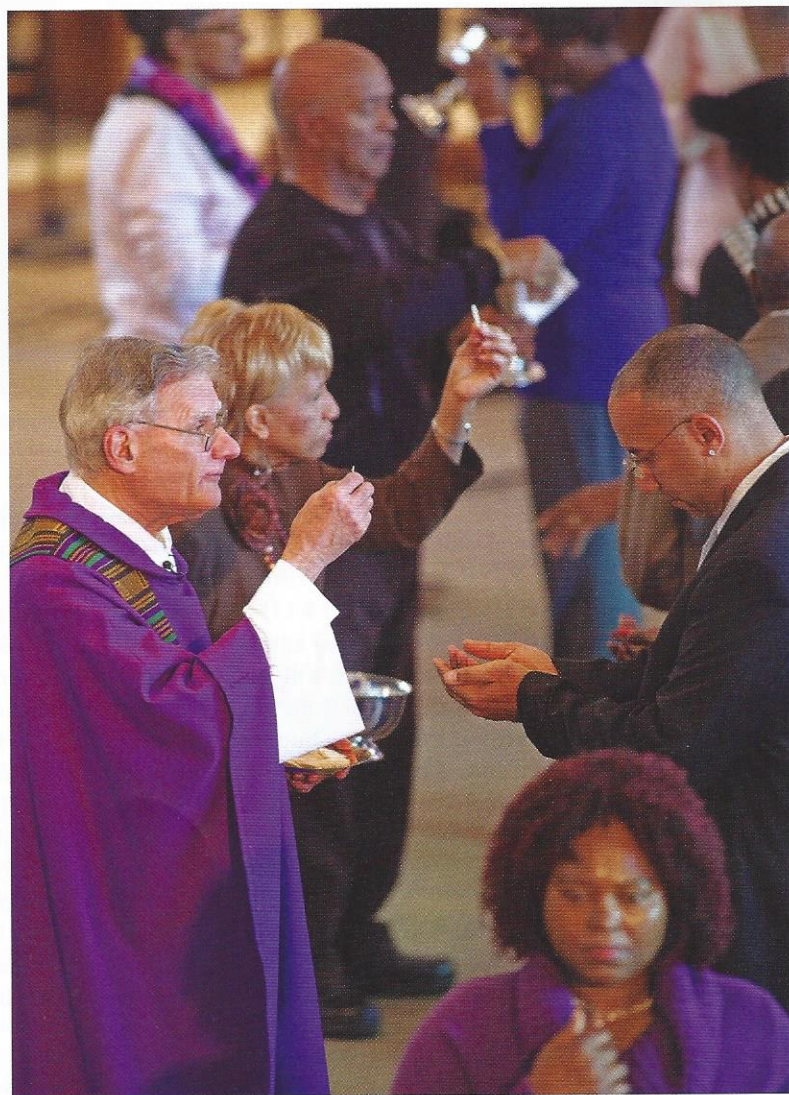
—Collect from Second Sunday of Advent

We race in Advent toward that which we already possess. As the Collect on the Second Sunday of Advent notes, “in haste” we go to meet Jesus Christ as we seek the love God has for us in the Second Person of the Trinity. Advent is the time to become a child again, admitting that God is still among us, surprising us into delight and wonder. The race, however, is not so gentle as a child in a mother’s arms or as a carefree toddler racing to her father. This chase that we enter into is also a race toward justice, hope, and community. The race to the finish line becomes the journey to our true home, living truth, and resting in the security of God-with-us.

ATTUNING OURSELVES TO CHRIST

Christians proceed in haste as they seek to cultivate an authentic desire for God. The prayer this race requires must be entered into especially by those who proclaim the journey to our people. Quiet prayer will focus our footrace that leads to the manger and then to the cross and tomb of our Savior. Prayer stirs up a desire for Christ, so time in silence is especially important for preachers and others responsible for the weekly liturgies. The desire for our Savior that Advent prayer brings will affect our gestures, attitudes, and our choice of words during the rest of the year. The journey on which this desire for Christ takes us will be a witness to others. All who observe the journey will see that we can imagine the footprints of those who have gone before us in haste to see Jesus.

Our haste is to meet the Incarnate Jesus. As Advent begins, we start the story all over again. Why do we begin again? We do so because we know well that we are different than we were last year. New insights, surprising experiences, and perhaps, unprocessed grief, have become more a part of our lives this year. A diagnosis of cancer, a birth of another child, a loss of a parent, or any number of events have brought joy or sadness to our lives. Our perspectives have changed as violence has marred cities, storms and fires have destroyed landscapes, and people have



During Advent we make room in our hearts for the love that God readily offers.

grown fearful. In other words, some pieces of our hearts have yet to step into the haste, into the profound race toward justice, fidelity, forgiveness, hopefulness, and integrity. With all that has changed in us, we need to attune ourselves again to the fact that Jesus is at the core of every aspect of our lives, every aspect of the human condition.

So we set out in haste to discover Jesus in every moment and facet of our earthly existence. No earthly power nor notion of prestige has the ability to stand in our way on this journey. No detour or roadblock will cause us to bypass our Advent pilgrimage. We cannot let the artificial things that are present at this time of year dissuade our pursuit of God. No matter the circum-

stances of our lives, Advent remains an important journey, and no earthly undertaking will hinder our sojourn that begins in our weakness, pain, and poverty.

MAKING A HOME FOR THE LORD

Our haste may take time because our nature is cumbersome and fragile. Years ago, while visiting my parents during the Advent season, I watched the pastor, who was legally blind and crippled with arthritis, slowly amble down the aisle during the entrance procession at Sunday Mass. It was his practice to spend the week holding the liturgical and scriptural texts under an enlarging device so he could read the Gospel and the prayers in very large print.

When it was time for him to proclaim the Gospel, he slowly walked to the center of the sanctuary as if his feet were weighted down in cement boots. He proclaimed the Gospel from memory because he could not see the text. This was the first time I heard him proclaim this Advent Gospel of Luke. I wept in the pew as I stood with my folks. Water streamed from my eyes because his entire life was Advent, making room within his pain, his disabilities, and his heart for God to make a home in him. He had worked hard; his haste was a lifestyle of waiting and hoping. His longing came from his daily pain. Our hastening toward God begins deep in our bones, in our human flesh that aches for miracles, in our voices and spirits that cry in the night-time for good news in the morning. Our entire bodies enter into the mystery of hastening toward God, who makes our flesh sing and our bodies hope for healing and strength.

The Gospel readings from Luke this Advent add fuel and vigor to our haste. On the First Sunday of Advent, the reading from Luke 21:25–28, 34–36 cautions to be on guard and not to be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness, and worries because people in those conditions will be caught unexpectedly like a trap on the day of the Lord. As preparation for the Advent journey, we open our hearts to the presence of Jesus, the presence in which we will know freedom, redemption, and hope in our brokenness and confusion. The fuel for the journey is the grace God gives us to offer every aspect of our human condition to be redeemed in Christ Jesus.

Advent, as the Collect states, is a time of “learning heavenly wisdom.” The readings and prayers sharpen our awareness that the mystery of the Incarnation requires a change in our thinking and attitude regarding the human condition. Listening to the Gospel on the First Sunday of Advent may prompt a realization that an adult exploration of faith is required. Our contemplation of the Incarnation must go beyond a cozy image of Mary and Joseph having a child in a clean cave with attentive oxen and freshly showered shepherds. In this season, we awaken to our redemption in Christ Jesus, to his ability to sit in our human hearts and bring the glory of heaven, to be with us no matter how we have strayed. We waken to our sinfulness and pride, to the human worries that keep us unable to see the needs of our sisters and brothers.

OPENING OURSELVES TO GOD

On the Second Sunday of Advent, in the reading from Luke 3:1–6, John the Baptist once again stirs the human heart to find the

person of Jesus. John spends his life urging haste to prepare for the person of Jesus, who brings salvation. Unless room is made in our hearts during this Advent season, we shall not find a home for God’s mercy and grace. Our lives must be emptied out enough for God to make his move to set us up to love and forgive others, no matter the circumstances. John the Baptist reminds us that our haste toward God is also God’s race toward us in that we shall find a mutual home for love, kindness, and peace and that place will ultimately be within our lives.

The reading from Luke 3:10–18 on the Third Sunday of Advent proclaims that we are part of the plan that helps others find what they need in God. John responds to those asking “What shall we do” with an instruction to share their food and clothing. We are to feed those who hunger, clothe those in need, and live in simplicity so that others may live. Our haste becomes a longing for the basic human needs of all people to be met so that they are left free to praise and worship God. When we race toward justice, God invites us to himself. God invites us to a love that blankets all people and erases distinctions of race, language, and false power. Our rejoicing on Gaudete Sunday coincides with our helping to bring about a place of beauty and bounty that encourages people to open themselves to relate to God.

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the reading from Luke 1:39–45 calls us to enter the mystery of Mary’s haste to support her cousin Elizabeth. The encounter of Mary and Elizabeth while both are pregnant is one of the tenderest in the Gospel. The expectation that new life and salvation will enter the world can be overwhelming. In this encounter, I realize the beauty of my former pastor waiting for the Messiah. As Mary and Elizabeth greet each other, I see that all who have lived with broken hearts and among violence will find surety and rest as they hasten to Jesus. During these Advent days, I must believe that they will gain “admittance to his company.”

As leaders of worship, we take people by the hand during Advent and lead them to love. We break open not only God’s word but God’s fidelity toward the fragile and the weary. We listen to the depths of regret and loss when people feel God’s absence. We hope in the crib of Jesus because we have lived his cross. We let go of our resistance to love, because we encounter the bodies of our loved ones who ache for healing and the manifestation of hope in Christ Jesus. In our Advent worship, the Eucharist proclaims the love we hasten toward, the heavenly wisdom we call our own. In Advent, we shall find our “admittance to his company” here on earth, making haste toward the love we already possess. ♦

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