



A New Liturgical Year Begins with an Advent Wake-Up Call

Welcome to a new *Church Year*. In our Church calendar, each new *Liturgical Year* begins on the First Sunday of Advent.

The *Liturgical Year* is the way our Church *celebrates, relives and makes present* to us, Christ and the main events in his life. It is the way our Church keeps placing before us the story of Jesus.

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** tells us: "*We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries.*" So through the ebb and flow of each liturgical year, we seek—with the guidance of our Church—to live and internalize the events of Christ's life.

Two Main Seasons

Nature has four seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Our Church year has two main seasons: the *Advent-Christmas* season and the *Lent-Easter* season. *Christmas* celebrates the Incarnation of Jesus—God becoming one of us. *Easter* celebrates his Death and Resurrection. Each season has a time of *preparation*. We prepare for the Feast of the Incarnation with four weeks of *Advent*. We prepare for the *Sacred-Triduum* (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Vigil) with 40 days of *Lent*. Both events (the Incarnation and our redemption) have an *extended period* of celebration. We do not just celebrate Christ's coming on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We celebrate it for *twelve days*, culminating with the *Feast of the Baptism of Jesus*. In a similar way, we do not just celebrate Christ's Resurrection on Easter Sunday. We celebrate it for the *Fifty Days* of Easter, culminating with the Feast of Pentecost. Wrapped around the two main seasons of the year are 34 Sundays in *Ordinary Time*.

Advent Season

During the four weeks of Advent, our Church calls us to focus on the comings of Christ: his First Coming in the flesh 2,000 years ago, his Second Coming at the end of time, and his daily comings to us during these in-between times. During Advent, we *remember* with gratitude the First Coming of Christ which led to our redemption. We await and look forward to his Second Coming, and during these in-between times, we are called to be constantly on the *alert* for his comings in the *events and encounters* in our daily lives.

First Readings

During the Advent season, our First Readings are mostly from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wonderfully articulates the longing of his people for God to re-enter their lives. The Book of Isaiah has three parts to it:

- 1) Chapters 1-39 were written *prior* to Israel's exile in Babylon.
- 2) Chapters 40-55 were written *during* the time of Israel's exile.
- 3) Chapters 56-66 were written *after* Israel's return from exile to a land and Temple that had been devastated by war.

This Sunday's reading is taken from the *post-exilic period* when the Israelites struggled to rebuild their lives and Temple. The verses we listened to today were written in the form of a *lament*. Isaiah is verbalizing his people's sadness over their past misdeeds. He also gives voice to their sense of God's absence from their lives and their desire for God to come visit them. Let us listen to what Isaiah has to say to his grieving and struggling people. Speaking for his people, Isaiah asks:

*Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?*

Notice the tendency to blame God for their wrongdoing, just as Eve blamed the serpent. But later on in the reading, the people recognize their wrongdoing:

*Would that you would meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of your ways!
Behold, you are angry and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people.*

It takes courage and humility for us to admit our wrongdoing and to take full responsibility for it. It is so easy for us to place the blame elsewhere. Then the lament gives expression to the people's sense of God's absence from their lives:

*There is none who calls upon your name
for you have hidden your face from us.*

Authors who write about the spiritual life would call such an experience 'spiritual suffering,' 'spiritual desolation,' or 'spiritual dryness.' It is a terrible thing to feel we have 'lost God' or to feel abandoned by him, to experience his absence from our lives. I'm sure all of us at times may have asked: "Where is God?"—"Why isn't he answering my prayers?"—"Why is he allowing these terrible things to happen to me or to my family or even to total strangers?" As spiritual pilgrims, it is important that we have some knowledge about the role of spiritual dryness in our lives. Its purpose is mainly to *purify* our relationship with God. My book, *13 Powerful Ways to Pray*, has a chapter on *Dealing with Spiritual Dryness*.

Despite Israel's experience of God's absence from their lives, they seem to possess an unshakable faith in him.

*You, Lord, are our father,
Our redeemer;
No ear has ever heard,
No eye has seen any God like you
And the mighty deeds you do.*

The lament finishes with these beautiful but challenging words:

*Lord, you are our father;
We are the clay and you are the potter:
We are all the work of your hands.*

While the above words are very poetic, they are also very challenging because they call us to be moldable clay in God's hands. They call us to let God do with us what he wills. In a culture that calls us to be independent, in full control of our lives, and self-sufficient, these words may not be so comforting.

During this Advent season, this reading calls us to face what is sinful in our lives, to place our trust in God's mercy and, if we are experiencing a sense of God's absence, to trust that God is present even when we do not feel his presence. (Our Advent Penance Service will be held Monday, December 11, at 4:00pm and 7:00pm.)

Second Readings

During the Advent season, as during the rest of the Liturgical Year, we listen to readings from the epistles of the New Testament. Today's Second Reading is the opening verses from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Little did Paul ever realize that his letters to the Corinthians and to other Christian communities would be collected together for generations of Christians to read. Reading these letters is like reading someone else's mail. We can assume that the Corinthians would have preferred if Paul's letters to them had not been saved since they portray them "warts and all." Fortunately for us, these letters have been preserved for they not only give us an insight into Paul's mind and heart, and into the issues of a first-century small Christian community, but they also continue to serve the faith journey of us who live 2,000 years later.

In today's verses, Paul, after greeting his readers, offers thanks to God for blessings bestowed through Jesus Christ. Paul has no doubt that the God whom Isaiah and his people longed to see has come to them in Christ. Paul concludes his address by reminding the Corinthians of their call to develop a close *fellowship* with Christ.

Gospel, Cycle B, The Year of Mark

In our Church and in most mainline Christian churches, there is a three-year cycle when it comes to the Gospels. In *Cycle A* which we have just completed, we listen to *Matthew*; in *Cycle B* which we start today, we listen to *Mark*; and in *Cycle C*, we listen to the Good News of Jesus Christ as proclaimed and seen through the eyes of *Luke*. We listen to readings from John throughout parts of *all three* cycles, especially during the Easter season.

Mark was the first Gospel to be written. Because Mark is also the shortest Gospel, you will notice that on some Sundays, we will hear Gospels from John and Luke. Today's passage has a strong note of urgency to it: "Be watchful! Be alert, for we do not know the hour when Christ will come."

Advent Wreath

If we live with others, or even if we live alone, we can observe the traditional practice of praying around the Advent Wreath. You can use the following prayer to bless your wreath.

*Lord our God,
We praise you for your Son, Jesus Christ:
he is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples,
he is the wisdom that teaches and guides us.
He is the Savior of every nation.
Lord God, let your blessing come upon us
as we light the candles of this wreath.
May the wreath and its light
be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.
May he come quickly and not delay.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Also, when you light the Advent candle, you can say the following beautiful prayer, which was the opening prayer for the First Sunday of Advent prior to the new translation of the Roman Missal.

*Father in heaven,
Our hearts desire the warmth of your love and
our minds are searching for the light of your Word.
Increase our longing for Christ our Savior
and give us the strength to grow in love,
that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing
in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth.
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.*

The Grace and Importance of Beauty in our Daily Lives

Recently, I have been reading a book called *The Grace of Beauty: Its Mystery, Power and Delight in Daily Life*, by Melanie Svoboda, SND, a Sister of Notre Dame in Chardon, Ohio. The following are some excerpts from Chapter 2—*How Beauty Affect Us*.

Researchers at the University College London, a public research institution, have actually measured the effect of beauty on the brain. In one study, they hooked up electrodes to peoples' heads to measure blood flow in various parts of the brain. Then they showed these people a series of pictures and asked them to rate each picture as beautiful or not. When people rated the picture as beautiful, something interesting happened. One part of their brain "lit up"; that is, there was an increase in blood flow to that part of the brain, the *medial orbitofrontal cortex*. This part of the brain serves several functions.

Mainly it is involved with emotions and the ability to make decisions. Further research is needed to understand the significance of this data. Nevertheless, the research does show that the experience of beauty has an actual physical impact on the brain.

It is no surprise, then, that beauty can affect our psychological and spiritual well-being. Thomas Moore, in his classic book *Care of the Soul*, argues that beauty is absolutely essential for the health of the soul. In fact, he goes so far as to say that if our lives lack beauty, we will probably suffer from familiar disturbances, such as depression or a sense of meaninglessness. The soul craves beauty, says Moore, and in its absence, it suffers what James Hillman has called “beauty neurosis.” If this is true, then we should be mindful of injecting regular “doses of beauty” into our lives. We should also be concerned about the long-term effect on individuals deprived of beauty through poverty, violence, war, natural disasters, incarceration, or living for years in refugee camps.

Let us now look more closely at some of the other effects beauty can have on us. First, beauty can slow us down. How often has a beautiful sunset slowed people down—or actually made them stop and gaze at it? It is as if beauty has the power to ensnare us, to distract us from doing what we were doing. Here is an example of beauty ensnaring me. I pull into the parking lot at the grocery store when one of my favorite songs or pieces of music is playing on my car radio. If it is the “oldie station,” it might be Andy Williams’s “Moon River” or Frank Sinatra’s “New York.” If it is on the classical station, it could be Mozart’s “A Little Night Music” or Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” What do I do? Do I switch off the car engine and go into the store? No, I switch off the car, Yes, but only partway so my radio stays on. Then I sit in my car and listen to the musical selection until it is finished. For me, the beauty of the music has “hooked me” and made me pause in the middle of my work.

Beauty’s power to lure people away from their ordinary tasks is demonstrated every time there is a solar eclipse. When this phenomenon occurs, millions of people leave work, gather in public places, and don special glasses to take in the mystery and beauty of such an event. A harvest moon will likewise lure people out of their cozy homes to get a better look at the giant orange orb rising on the horizon. The sighting of an eagle or blue heron also tempts people to stop and stare. A good question to ask ourselves is this: What kind of beauty do we pause for?

Studies have also shown that beauty can lift our spirits and ease our stress. A visit to an art museum, attendance at a concert, a stroll along the beach, the taste of a favorite meal, the smell of gardenias, or the sight of a mother duck swimming with her brood of ducklings—all have a way of lifting our hearts or calming our spirits.

Beauty can also unite us with other people. We fell at one with others, whether we are watching fireworks on the Fourth of July, cheering for our favorite sports team, enjoying the music of a local band on the town square, or

singing Christmas carols at midnight Mass. Yes, beauty has the power to unite us as few other things can....

Beauty affects us. It slows us down. It eases our anxiety. It unites us with each other. It is a pathway to God. Psychologists say that beauty also has the power to heal us.

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Each chapter ends with questions for reflection (which facilitates group use), a pray and a digital connection. The following are all three from Chapter 2.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you experienced beauty’s power to slow you down or even stop you? If so, when and how?
2. Have you experienced beauty’s power to lift your spirits, ease your stress, or be a pathway to God? If so, when and how?
3. If beauty is so important for physical and spiritual well-being, how can you inject regular doses of beauty into your everyday life?

Prayer for Beauty

Come, Beauty, slow me down.

Stop me in my tracks.

*Come, Beauty, and lure me away from my work,
my stress, my constant worrying.*

Lift my spirits; ease my anxieties.

*Help me to experience the vastness of the created world
of which I am a tiny but significant part.*

*Make me more attentive to the beauty that surrounds me,
the beauty of the extraordinary
and the beauty of the everyday.*

Come, Beauty, be a pathway for me to God.

Our Creator, Our Sustainer, Our Beloved One.

Amen.

Digital Connection

Suggested YouTube: “For the Beauty of the Earth” (John Rutter with lyrics), performed by St. Phillip’s Boys Choir.

I feel pretty certain you will not regret ordering Sr. Melanie’s book. I believe the book would make a great Christmas gift, perhaps especially for family members or friends who have a spiritual side or an artistic side and may not connect to church. We have ordered 50 copies of this \$15 book and will be selling them at \$10 each (the Pastor’s Advent break...LOL!)

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah

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