



Sunday Advent Reflections 2023

RENEWAL & RESTORATION

Introduction

Advent, Renewal, Restoration

We begin Advent this year in a world rife with challenges, needs, and grace-filled opportunities. The world cries out for compassion, peace, and response to suffering. While we experience our world as much more interconnected than in previous times, we are also faced with deep fissures and seeming irreconcilable differences that threaten to upend our relationships with one another and our world. On the personal and communal levels, as well on the national and international ones, the challenge of Jesus' compassion and inclusive ministry call us to respond. How do we make God's love revealed to us in Jesus a reality in response to these deep differences?

This Advent, we are invited to ponder the Sunday Advent readings and open ourselves to the transformative power of the Spirit that speaks to us of the ways to be love and mercy in this changed world. **Pondering** seems a helpful posture this Advent. It appears in Luke's gospel when Mary brings the child Jesus to the Temple and Simeon tells her that:

"This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed - and you yourself shall be pierced with a sword - so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare."

These words come after the joyful proclamation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. They are told this child will bring peace and joy. Jesus' birth is both a sign of peace and the downfall of many. Mary's response to this revelation is pondering, treasuring these things in her heart. Her pondering posture comes to a climax at the foot of the cross. While she may not fully comprehend God's presence in Jesus' crucifixion, and like any mother would like to protect her child from this horrible violence,

she trusts that the God that has blessed her and been with her throughout her life is indeed active and present in this moment also. That is the heart of the meaning of pondering. It embraces two seemingly contradictory experiences and trusts that God is in both and is present and working through them. It holds them and reflects on them, seeking to trace that divine presence and its challenge now and in the future. It aims to discern God's presence even in the most unlikely and difficult persons and events. It challenges us to respond as Jesus did with mercy and compassion, especially to the most vulnerable and neglected, trusting in the transformative power of living as Jesus did. It calls us to find God in every situation and person. And when we encounter problems and persons not reflective of God's love and mercy, we find ways to stand in solidarity with them, accompany them and work to bring healing, transformation, and reconciliation.

This Advent may our pondering posture open us to God's compassionate presence and empower us to re-imagine how to live the gospel in these challenging times.

Why Renewal?

Each Advent, we as individuals and communities of disciples of Jesus are offered the opportunity to look closely at our lives and the ways that the Spirit is calling us to reflect God's love, mercy, and compassion.

What are the new ways God is coming into our lives this Advent season? What do we need to do to be more open to the promptings of the Spirit? How can the love of God that has come to us in Christ Jesus renew our lives? What needs to change to incarnate God's love in our world? How can the Spirit help us address the various fissures in our lives so we can build a world that reflects the justice and mercy that marked Jesus' dream for the world?

Why Restoration?

Restoration can mean most broadly returning someone or something to a former state. However, when used in the phrase ‘restorative justice,’ it focuses more on repair, reconciliation, and healing of hearts and relationships. While the challenge of restorative justice is most visible in detention settings, its value can permeate all aspects of our personal and communal lives. How can we, as Christians, embody the restorative power of God's love and mercy in our personal and community lives? How does our ministry bring healing and restoration to others – those harmed, those who have harmed others, and the brokenness it causes their families and communities? How does restoration function in our personal lives? This year in our Advent reflections, we seek to be open to the cries of those most in need and the challenge to restore each person to their dignity as God’s creation.

Select video examples of ***Wisdom Voices of Chaplaincy*** will accompany each week's reflections to deepen our focus on the ways Restorative Justice can become a vital assistance to our ministries of accompaniment.

Reflection Approach: SEE-DISCERN-ACT

These weekly reflection will be based on the readings for each Sunday of Advent and paired with video segments from ***Wisdom Voices of Chaplaincy***. We seek a fresh outpouring of the Spirit to help hear God’s word and its implications for your life. Read the scriptures and ask for insight into their importance for your life.

The reflections for each of the four weeks of Advent are based on the SEE-DISCERN-ACT method used in Catholic Social Teaching and Evangelii Gaudium by Pope Francis. **This method seeks to move from**

opening our lives to the Spirit, discerning God's presence and call in our lives, and then moving to act or respond to that call or challenge. This, hopefully, will inspire our prayer and reflection and assist in understanding their implications for our lives. [Traditionally, this method is referred to as the SEE-JUDGE-ACT method, but the 'Judge' term here is understood more as discernment than judging.]

SEE

+The first step involves intentional awareness and observation by seeing, hearing, and experiencing the lived reality of individuals and communities, with special focus on those on the margins. It stresses attention to their presence and their needs.

Pope Francis captures this best when he challenges us to develop a 'culture of encounter', doing as Jesus did: *"not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying 'what a shame, poor people,' but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion and then to draw near."* (9/13/16)

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DISCERN

+A process of discernment inspires the second step in our reflection. What are the ways the Scriptures and others' experiences, stories, and lives help us perceive God's presence in them? How is our call to follow Jesus challenging us to respond? Listening to others in scripture and contemporary examples, how are we being called to re-imagine our discipleship, especially in light of the cries of those in need? Where are we being called to restore and heal broken relationships?

In addition to our scriptures, we have powerful examples of various prison chaplains and ministers captured in the ***Wisdom Voices of***

Chaplaincy videos to assist our prayer and reflection. They provide beautiful experiences of the incarnation of the gospel in the accompanying ministry they model, ever attentive to the presence of the Spirit in their encounters. The various *Wisdom Voices* attest to listening and discerning God's presence in experiences we may not be so open to finding as revelatory.+

ACT

+Advent anticipates the incarnation of God's love in Jesus at Christmas. As bearers of Jesus' Spirit in our world today, how will we enflesh God's love in our lives and ministry in light of the challenges of our lived reality? Incarnation celebrates God's real involvement in the lives of everyone and everything in our world, sometimes called "deep Incarnation." This Advent we are invited to look deeply and discern, even in the most unlikely of persons and situations, the transformative power of God's compassion and mercy and how we can become instruments of that ongoing Incarnation.+