



## Advent Assembly - 2022

### *Be Present to the Presence*

"I used to pray that God would be present with me. I no longer do so. Now my prayer is that I might know God's presence with me." ~ *Desiring God's Will*, David Benner, p.62

While we know that God has promised to never walk away, the difficulties, celebrations, setbacks, successes, and even the tedious things of life can distract us from His unwavering attention and love for us. The season of Advent, which is the beginning of the Christian liturgical year, invites intentional reflection on God's response to our deepest need: Jesus.

Advent also brings with it a plethora of devotional writings, poetry, music, and other resources to enhance our engagement with the season. Instead of adding to those choices, the approach taken here will be different in that we'll use the Advent season to practice and develop a posture of receptivity to God's involvement in our lives. To be present to His presence. And to do that, in part, by accepting and embracing our daily circumstance and finding God there.

### **This Day**

To begin, how would you answer this question:  
In general, do you dwell more on the past, the present, or the future?

As you think about your response, consider this thought from Wendell Berry: "The approach of a man's life out of the past is history, and the approach of time out of the future is mystery. Their meeting is the present, and it is consciousness, the only time life is alive." (*The Long-Legged House*, p.23) Berry's perspective is important to consider, particularly in light of the distracted culture we live in – not to mention the busyness of the holiday season.

While it is vital to look back and remember from where we've come, and wise to look ahead at where we're headed, right now – this moment – is when and how we exist. The present is a gift (no pun intended). Our moment-by-moment living is a relational and spiritual experience with God. Therefore *this day* is worthy of our best attention and hearty engagement.

So how do we whole-heartedly embrace and stay engaged in this moment? And what does it mean to be present to God's presence?

As you ponder these questions, perhaps you can relate to an observation made by pastor and author M. Craig Barnes: "God is always present but not usually apparent." (*The Pastor as Minor Poet*, p.22) Wherever you are on the spectrum from very aware to oblivious to God's activity in your life, He is certainly near and attentive to each of us.

## God is Present

Perhaps you're familiar with *Lectio Divina* (divine listening) which is a contemplative, meditative reading of a small portion of Scripture. Similarly, *Visio Divina* involves thoughtful, reflective observation and reflection not on Scripture but of an image or object.

To activate some thinking about the personal and intentional way God is involved in our lives, here is a *Vision Divina* exercise:

Begin by getting comfortable.

Relax with a few deep breaths and invite God in this experience.

Look at the painting below.

Place yourself into the scene.

Imagine what you see and hear.

Who might these people be?

What is going on?

What occurred prior to this moment?

Spend five minutes contemplating this image and reflect on what it makes you think and feel. If desired, jot down your observations, feelings, speculations, wonderings, etc.





Painted by: Corby Eisbacher

The painting above is a depiction of Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. Here's an excerpt from the book of Luke that describes their meeting:

### **Mary Visits Elizabeth**

Luke 1:39-45 | New Century Version

*Mary got up and went quickly to a town in the hills of Judea. She came to Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the unborn baby inside her jumped, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She cried out in a loud voice, "God has blessed you more than any other woman, and he has blessed the baby to which you will give birth. Why has this good thing happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? When I heard your voice, the baby inside me jumped with joy. You are blessed because you believed that what the Lord said to you would really happen."*

The presence of God was very real and tangible to Mary and Elizabeth. They were two women, faithful and obedient to God as they labored and toiled from day-to-day. Then, as God awakened ancient prophecies, they responded with trust and joy as they gladly accepted their unexpected place in the story of redemption. Mary and Elizabeth were present to God's presence.

And just as God was present to them, He is present to us.

## Paying Attention

It may seem trite to say something obvious, such as, “just as God was present to them, He is present to us.” Certainly, that is pretty basic to our understanding of God. Yet sometimes the basic tenets of what’s true are the things that require our best effort to develop and maintain a vibrant life with Jesus.

Increasing our awareness of God’s involvement with us uniquely and personally is foundational to our spiritual formation. Recognizing God in our happy, sad, celebratory, and tragic moments is critical to our understanding of who He is and how we relate with Him.

In line with this concept, Jesuit Priest William Barry suggests, “Our first task, then, is to ask God to help us to a practical belief in his active presence to us. Then we must school ourselves to pay attention to our experience of life in order to discern the touch of God.” (*God’s Passionate Desire and Our Response*, p.109)

Advent is a season that lends itself to doing just that: asking God to help us believe in His active presence to each one of us. Alongside traditional Advent themes of waiting and anticipation, we can ask the Spirit to help us also recognize and respond to God’s intentional, loving touch during the commonplace moments of today. This moment. Right now.

## Daily practice: the Welcome Prayer

During the weeks of Advent, as you pace with a good book or blog or devotional, consider employing a simple practice, described below, to assist with being open to God and increase your ability to recognize His kind and constant involvement in your experiences.

This practice is best done in a quiet, relaxed state. So take a few minutes and think about what helps you settle, relax, and be quiet in your spirit? How would you describe the perfect setup for a quiet time alone?

Using some of those methods and means, set aside several minutes every day of Advent during which you clear your mental, emotional, and perhaps physical clutter. This is to be a sacred time during which you are by yourself for the purpose of opening yourself to God’s presence. There’s no agenda. Just be quiet and still. Breathe slowly. Relax. Rest. Ask the Spirit to shield you from busyness and protect this time as you heighten your awareness of God’s nearness and love.

While in that quiet listening space, pray the Welcome Prayer. This prayer invites a heightened awareness to many things that confront and challenge us. It exposes the tension of living a life devoted to Christ in the midst of an existence that is difficult. Whatever each day brings, we are

to welcome it all, including – and especially – the love and presence of God and His ongoing work in each of us.

Say this prayer slowly, methodically, at least once each day during Advent. Invite God's Spirit to assist your recognition of God's care for you. His non-stop presence. His nearness. His joy for who you are to Him. After praying this prayer one or more times, sit quietly for a few minutes with a posture of openness. Ask God for His peace. Settle into His love. Release to Him your burdens, hurts, pains, and anxieties.

### **Welcome Prayer | Thomas Keating**

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me today because I know it's for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations, and conditions.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure.

I let go of my desire for survival and security.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God and God's action within.

Amen

### **Have Great Expectations**

Through a daily practice of the Welcome Prayer during the weeks of Advent, be as vulnerable as you can, opening yourself to all that God has brought specifically into the coming and going of each day. Ask Him to help you be present to His presence. And let's have great expectations for recognizing more moments when we can say, "There's God!" To embrace anew the reality that God is Emmanuel to us. May we give and receive the joy of Mary and Elizabeth to one another in response to God's always present, watchful care.

Psalm 121: 7-8

The Lord will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;  
the Lord will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.