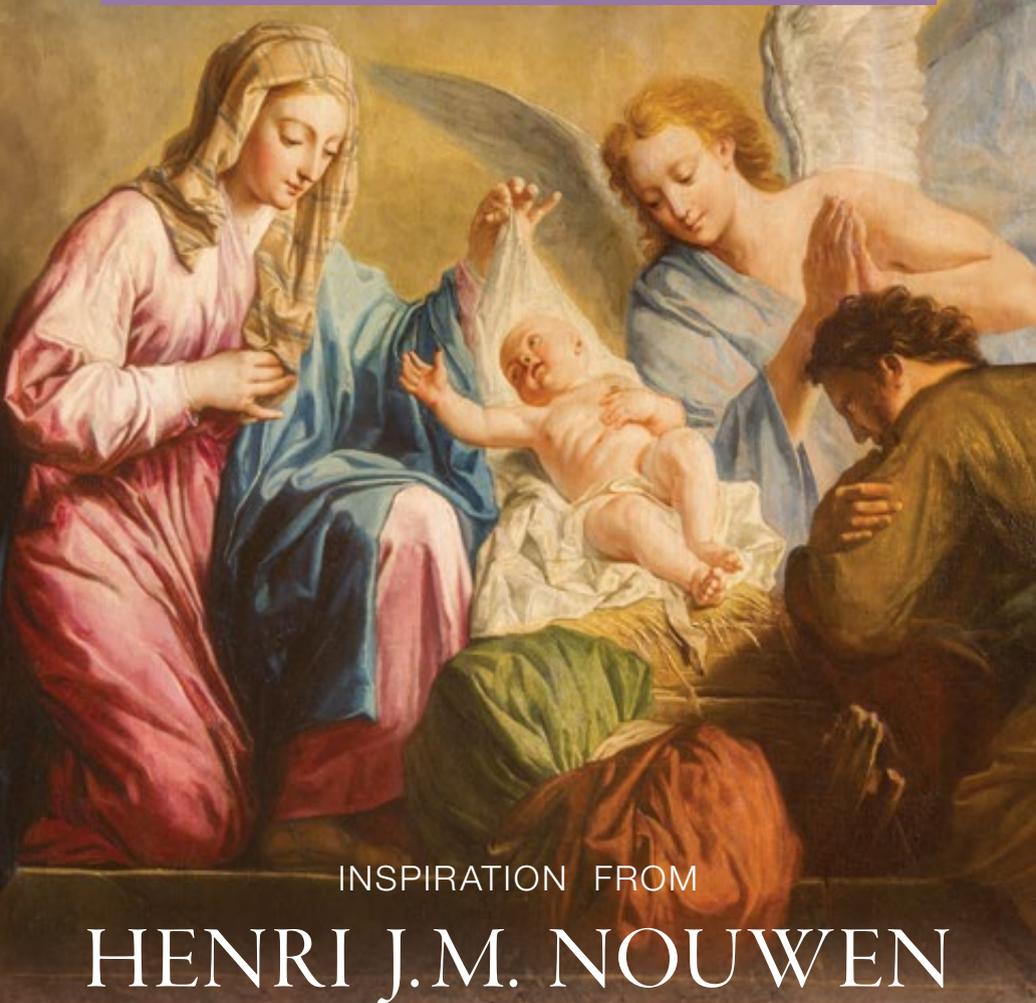


LET THE HEAVENS  
*Be Glad*

ADVENT ♦ DEVOTIONS



INSPIRATION FROM

HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

The writings of Henri J. M. Nouwen presented on the following pages are just a taste of the enriching, profound and spiritually moving works that he created over his decades of writing.

Nouwen (1932–1996) was a prolific author whose words and insights helped millions better understand the blessings of heaven that came to us on earth through the birth of the Christ Child. In this Advent season, setting aside time to sit quietly with God and pray is an ideal way to prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus at Christmas. Just as the angels from heaven sang to earthly shepherds: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth,” we rejoice in the good news of great joy that our Savior from sin and death has arrived from above.

Each day of Advent, a Scripture verse, a select excerpt of Nouwen’s writing, an original reflection based on that excerpt and a short prayer are presented.

Through his many writings, Henri Nouwen carved a clear path for us to follow as we gladly celebrate with all the ranks of heaven our newborn King. We present these materials to you, our readers, in the hope that they will serve as an aid for you on that path.

Terence Hegarty, editor

## The First Sunday of Advent

# NEWS LIKE NO OTHER

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“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”  
which means, “God is with us.”

Matthew 1:23

*I want to write to you about the love of God becoming visible in Jesus. How is that love made visible through Jesus? It is made visible in the descending way. That is the great mystery of the Incarnation. God has descended to us human beings to become a human being with us; and once among us, descended to the total dereliction of one condemned to death. (Jesus: A Gospel, 7)*

A friend was once asked, “How does God love me?” He thought about that for a while and then said, “I guess through me God loves you.” Deep within all of us is a longing to love and be loved, to know that someone cares and will never leave or forsake us. Unfortunately, some people spend a lifetime searching for that kind of love that seems forever beyond their reach. Like the words of the song by Johnny Lee: “Lookin’ for love in all the wrong places ...”

That’s what makes the message of Advent so wonderfully special. God wanted his love to be real for all the world to see, and so God gave us Jesus. We no longer have to search for love. God’s love comes looking for us, and the cross is there to prove it. That’s why when Jesus finds us, we call him “Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

How does God love you? He does it in flesh and blood, and calls him Jesus.

Lord, this Advent, help me to see and believe with all my heart that Jesus truly is my Emmanuel, “God is with us.” Amen.

Monday, the First Week of Advent

## IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

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Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Luke 1:34

*They are eyes which saw her Lord before she conceived him, contemplated the Word before it became flesh in her and sensed God within before she heard the angel's message. With these eyes the Virgin sees the child. Her gaze is not that of a proud mother of an exceptional baby; she sees him with the faithful eyes of the Mother of God. Before seeing him with the eyes of her body, she saw him with the eyes of faith. (Behold the Beauty of the Lord, 34)*

Have you ever had a dream that seemed so real you just knew it was more than a dream, that it had some hidden meaning and you were determined to find out what that meaning was? Well, Mary's dream was real. It was about God's plan to make the impossible possible by sending salvation to earth in the form of an infant, his Son, and through that Son he would save the world.

But Mary's dream was God's dream, and it involved us as well. God's dream has to do with waking us up to truly believe that his love is real and not a figment of our imagination. It's as if God is saying, “Go ahead! Wake up! You're not dreaming. Jesus is here for you ... forever.”

Dear Lord, sometimes in the night, my dreams become like nightmares that fill me with dread. I ask you to take my dreams and fill them with the joy and peace that comes from knowing that Jesus is my Savior and Lord. Please let that dream come true. Amen.

Tuesday, the First Week of Advent

## TRUST ME

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Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Luke 1:38

*Mary is so open, so free, so trusting. She is completely willing to hear words that go far beyond her own comprehension. She knows that the words spoken to her by the angel come from God. She seeks clarification, but she does not question their authority. She senses that the message of Gabriel will radically interrupt her life, and she is afraid, but she does not withdraw. (Jesus: A Gospel, 15)*

I can't help but think of Abraham in the Old Testament. I can't help but recall how God came to him and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham didn't know where God was taking him, but nevertheless, he obeyed. Now here is this mere child, Mary, being told to trust God to lead her into the unknown. What does she say? “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Have you ever wondered if God may be saying much the same thing to you and me? “Trust me! I know what I'm doing, I know where I'm taking you, and you're going to be just fine. Why? Because I love you.” And then the Lord waits patiently for the words, “I am your servant. Lead me and I will follow.”

Dear Lord, Mary was so open to trust you and let you lead her into the unknown. Help me to trust you as well, as you lead me to face the uncertainties of my own life, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Wednesday, the First Week of Advent

## TOGETHER IN FAITH

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And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

Luke 1:36

*God offers Mary an intimate, human friend with whom she can share what seems incommunicable. Elizabeth, like Mary, has experienced divine intervention and has been called to a response of faith. She can be with Mary in a way no one else possibly could. (Jesus: A Gospel, 18)*

I recall a church program years ago that encouraged people to be open to sharing their life experiences in such a way that others might come to know they were not alone. Many shared what it meant to lose a loved one. Others spoke of having gone through life-changing surgery. Still others were willing to talk about marriage issues and how to recover from divorce. The program worked because it gave people the opportunity to “connect” with others with like-minded experiences.

Mary had someone like that in Elizabeth. Elizabeth was more than a cousin; she was a friend. Even more than that, she shared a connection with God in his plan to bring hope, joy and new life to the world. These two women could joyfully share a life-altering experience with each other and with God, an experience that you and I share in the faith we have in Jesus.

Lord, thank you for giving me a community of believers that share my faith in Jesus. Not only that, but I can share my fears and hurts with these friends and they will not turn away ... all because of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, the First Week of Advent

## LET IT BE

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Luke 1:41-42

*Through these two women God has decided to change the course of history. Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen? But Mary says, "Let it happen to me," and she immediately realizes that only Elizabeth will be able to affirm her "yes." (Jesus: A Gospel, 18-19)*

When I read how Mary and Elizabeth were so open to God's miraculous plan for their lives, I can't help but notice that they were "in it together." Even the unborn infant, who came to be known as John the Baptist, was drawn into the wonderful celebration when they first came together. Both women were united in their willingness to believe and act on the impossible. Both women heard God's promise and said, "Let it be."

There's a song by the Beatles that goes: "When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be." It may seem strange to have Mary's words, "Let it be," called to mind by a rock music group. Yet in troubled times in our troubled world, those three words are an invitation for all to let God be God and step out in faith, trusting that his will is forever done.

Dear heavenly Father, you changed the world through your Son Jesus. Now, in your mercy, let me be an agent of that change in this world of yours for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Friday, the First Week of Advent

## LARGER THAN LIFE

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And Mary said,  
“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Luke 1:46-48

*God not only chose an insignificant people to carry the Word of salvation through the centuries, not only chose a small remnant of those people to fulfill God's promises, not only chose a humble girl in an unknown town in Galilee to become the temple of the Word, but God also chose to manifest the fullness of divine love in a man whose life led to a humiliating death outside the walls of the city. (The Selfless Way of Christ, 29-30)*

The word *magnify* means enlarge or increase. We know that Jesus is “larger than life” for those who believe in him. But for this young mother, the truth surrounding Jesus would come early. “My soul magnifies the Lord ...” This yet-to-be-born infant filled her very soul with the wonder of God’s hope for all mankind. Mary’s words foreshadow the words of others who came early to believe that this child would become larger than life itself. Simeon, upon meeting Jesus, said, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34). John the Baptist said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Many today are familiar with Oswald Chambers’ devotional book, aptly titled *My Utmost for His Highest*. The title says it all. To meet Jesus as he comes to us in his Word this Advent season is to join with Mary and others in saying, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Dear Lord, show me how to glorify Jesus in my life by becoming a light of faith that points to the One who died for me and rose again. Amen.

Saturday, the First Week of Advent

## PROMISE FULFILLED

He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Luke 1:54-55

*God is a faithful God, a God who fulfills the divine promise and will never let us down. God shows this faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. God shows his faithfulness to Moses and Aaron and to the people as they move from Egypt to the promised land. But God's faithfulness goes beyond that. God not only wants to be a God for us, but also a God with us. (Here and Now, 128)*

Promises made and promises broken are a part of life some say. A father promises to make it home for his son's big game but then forgets and comes in late. A couple promises to love, honor and cherish each other, but then one of them leaves for someone else. Broken promises make for broken hearts.

But what if someone made a promise and the promise took on human form? What if that promise came from God, and in faith you came to believe that this promise was for real, that this promise would never be broken because when God made that promise, it came in flesh and blood—the blood of a cross. And what if you stood under that cross and made your own promise that with God's help you would be faithful unto death? What if?

Lord God, from the days of Abraham until now you have never failed to keep the promise of love and mercy that came through Jesus. Help me to keep my promise to fear, love and trust in you above all things. Amen.

## LET THE HEAVENS *Be Glad*

and let our hearts rejoice as we prepare to receive the Christ Child.

We, with all the hosts above, celebrate the good news that God's Son descended from his throne on high to come to earth in human flesh for our salvation. Henri J.M. Nouwen, one of the most beloved spiritual thinkers of the 20th century, wrote about the incarnation of Christ as the Babe in Bethlehem in a way that has captivated and inspired readers the world over. Excerpts from Nouwen's engaging insights are paired with original reflections and prayers in this booklet for each day of Advent, as we journey together through this season of joy and marvel at our Savior's arrival among us.

