

# GOD *is* NEAR

Stories and  
Reflections  
for Advent



Fr. Thomas J. Connery

# Introduction

It was just before Christmas and the magistrate was in a happy mood. He asked the prisoner who was in the dock, "What are you charged with?"

The prisoner replied, "Doing my Christmas shopping too early."

"That's no crime," said the magistrate. "Just how early were you doing this shopping?"

"Before the shop opened," answered the prisoner.

Unfortunately, many of us have fallen into the habit of celebrating Christmas weeks ahead of time. I am no Scrooge, and I understand that we need to do our shopping, card writing and decorating before the great feast, but we can't let that be the only thing we do these wonderful days before Christmas. We first celebrate Advent. Advent is a time of preparation—preparation not only for the day of Christmas, but ultimately for the Lord's coming. Christ came 2,000 years ago; he comes to us today and will come again in all his glory at his second coming. In the midst of all our activities, we take time to reflect and prepare. If Christ came today, would I be ready? Is God first in my life? Am I allowing all the festivities to subtract from the true meaning of Christmas? This little booklet hopefully will point you in the right direction. Admittedly, it is simple and easy to read, but hopefully it will give you that boost you need to keep Christ the focus of these days. Blessed Advent!

—Fr. Thomas J. Connery

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament* © 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

## First Sunday of Advent

### Keep Awake

[Jesus said to them,] "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap."

Luke 21:34-35

Fr. Spano taught biology when I was in college. An excellent teacher, at the beginning of each class he would call on one student and ask him one question from the previous class. That one question carried a lot of weight: It counted as a test grade, and you either passed or failed. Most unsettling was that you never knew whom he would call. You would wait with anticipation, hoping he would pass over your name. If not, you hoped he would give you an easy question. Don't think that once you were called you were off the hook. Just to keep you on your toes, he could call on you again even before others had their chance. Therefore you had to always be ready. There were no excuses. Fr. Spano wanted you to review daily your lessons so you were ready just in case your number came up.

Isn't that our Lord's warning to us? Stay awake; be ready, for you never know when your appointed time will come. Advent isn't solely about preparing for Christmas; it reminds us most importantly that Jesus will come again, and we have to be ready. Even if Jesus does not return in our lifetime, we all have to be ready for our own death. We may not like to think about it, but it is a reality. Nor can we assume that we are going to live to a certain age. Life can change in a moment. Rather than live in fear, we need to live each day as if it were our last; that way there will be no surprises.

*FATHER*, I'd rather Advent just be about preparing for Christmas, a wonderful time to spend with family and friends. Yet I know that Advent speaks of my destiny. Help me to be always conscious of your presence. Then no matter what happens, I will be ready and live my days in your peace. *AMEN*.

If you knew you had only a short time to live, what changes would you make in your life?



Monday, First Week of Advent

## Graced Moments

At once they left their nets and followed him.

Matthew 4:20



A Texas rancher asked his veterinarian for some free advice. “I own a horse that walks normally sometimes and limps the other times. What should I do?”

The veterinarian paused a moment and then replied, “The next time he walks normally, sell it.”

Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John, and they waste no time in following him. They drop what they are doing and follow him. That moment was a graced moment. Perhaps if they did not act on it, it would have passed them by. When the Lord calls, we are to answer. It may perhaps appear foolhardy, for we caution others not to act on impulse. True, but if it is the nudge from the Spirit, we are to respond. We can be overly cautious with God. I bet there are many occasions while sitting in church you felt the whisper from God—attend that retreat, join that Bible study, get involved with that ministry. We hear it, but we don’t act. We find too many excuses why not to do it. It is a shame, for it is God’s invitation. Andrew and the others wasted no time; it changed their lives forever. It can change yours too.

*FATHER*, I am good at making excuses, at least for the things I am not inclined to do. I admit if something is important to me, I find the time and reason to do it. I believe you do speak to me. I have felt your nudge, but I have ignored it. Help me to take that step of faith and RSVP to your invitation. Just as for Andrew, it may change my life. *AMEN*.

Next time you feel God inviting you to do something, say yes. Begin with a baby step.



## Tuesday, First Week of Advent

# One Who Watches Over Us

Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.

Isaiah 11:6

Some time ago, the New York papers ran a photo of two subway riders: Isaac Theil, an Orthodox Jew wearing a yarmulke, sat quietly while a young African American, head covered with a hoodie, slept peacefully on his shoulder. The photo caused quite a sensation. It was the picture of an unlikely duo: the yarmulke and hoodie joined to each other. With so much fear and suspicion of those different from us, it was uplifting to see this unlikely pair connected. It offers us hope; perhaps we can get along. Isaac made no fuss about it; he just wanted to help a tired fellow New Yorker. Sometimes it is as simple as that.



In these days of busy preparations for the feast of Christmas, there is plenty to do, but don't in your rush forget the most important task: Make peace with those with whom you may have a strained relationship. As far as you are able, extend the olive branch of peace. They may not be ready or able to accept it, but offer it. This is the time to forgive. Start small. It may be as simple as offering a shoulder to rest on.

*FATHER*, I admit I can be too proud, too stubborn, too resistant to offer the gift of forgiveness. Let me put aside blame and my need to be right and just forgive and move on. I know it is not going to happen by accident. I must be willing to be the first to offer a hand, my heart or even shoulder to lean on. With your grace, I can do it.

*AMEN*.

If there is any one you need to forgive, do so. Extend the gift of peace.



Wednesday, First Week of Advent

## Hunger for God

On this mountain the LORD of hosts  
will provide for all peoples  
A feast of rich food and choice wines,  
juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines.

Isaiah 25:6

Last December I organized an outing to Our Lady Queen of the Universe Shrine in Orlando, Florida. Responding to our Holy Father's challenge to the new evangelization, I took as guests those we feed on the weekend. Some are homeless, others just short on food. Each Advent the shrine converts its chapel into a splendid manger scene. I look forward to it every year. I wanted our weekend guests to experience it. I also know that visiting a church may not be enough to get them on the bus. I enticed them by offering them dinner at a buffet-style restaurant. That was the game changer. We had 41 enthusiastic, hungry pilgrims. They enjoyed the shrine, but they were in heaven at the buffet. I couldn't believe the mounds of food they devoured. They made quite a few trips, piling the food on their plate. Apparently they were not too concerned about the extra calories. It was an early Christmas gift.

Often heaven is described as a banquet table, as here in Isaiah. When you live with constant food scarcity, a banquet where you can eat and drink to your heart's content is paradise. I don't believe heaven is one huge smorgasbord, but it is a place of complete contentment and peace in God's awesome presence. Jesus came to show us the way. May we not fill up on the world's false promises, but hunger for God's presence in our lives.

*HEAVENLY FATHER*, you feed and care for us, not only in our material wants, but also in our deepest spiritual hunger. Thanks to your Son Jesus, we hope to be with you for eternity. We will experience the perfect joy and contentment. Until that day, may I live a life that honors you. *AMEN*.

Though it is not Lent, do a little fasting today to remind yourself that only God can satisfy your deepest hungers.



Thursday, First Week of Advent

## *Trust in God's Will*

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Matthew 7:21

A certain fellow decided to earn a living by gambling on the lottery, and indeed he was quite lucky. He won millions. When asked how he managed to do it, he answered, "I was smart, and I was lucky. I like the number 7. I figured two 7s would be luckier than one, so I multiplied 7 times 7 and put all my money down on number 48, and believe it or not, I won!" The friend said, "But 7 times 7 is 49, not 48!"



Smiling, the man replied, "I know, that's the lucky part."

I hope we are not banking on luck or chance to enter the kingdom of God. We know better and we know the power of the gospel. Nor do I hope we plan on honoring God by our mere, empty words. We may be under the false assumption that by reciting certain prayers, the more often the better, we gain salvation. It is not. It is by doing the will of our Father. Trust Jesus and live accordingly. Care for the poor, feed the hungry, tend to the sick. It is being a peacemaker. It is one who shares his or her time, talent and treasure. It is simply doing what God asks. This shows that we are his children.

*FATHER*, I don't want to be a noisy gong. I don't want to bank on luck. While I have the chance, I want to live the life that delights you. I don't want only to claim that I know your Son Jesus, but I want to live as I believe in him. Each day, one day at a time, may I live as your disciple. Talk is cheap. *AMEN*.

Do one thing for the less fortunate: volunteer at a soup kitchen, donate food or visit the sick. Your choice.





# GOD *is* NEAR

Advent is a time of preparation—preparation not only for the day of Christmas, but ultimately for the Lord’s coming. Christ came 2,000 years ago; he comes to us today and will come

again in all his glory at his second coming. In the midst of all our activities, we take time to reflect and prepare. If Christ came today, would I be ready? Is God first in my life? Am I allowing all the festivities to subtract from the true meaning of Christmas?

Christian faith has always found strength in sharing stories of how God acts in our lives. In this booklet, Fr. Thomas Connery of St. Peter Parish in Deland, Florida, continues to enrich our spiritual lives through the art of storytelling to help with our search for the divine in daily life. His stories and reflections bring laughter and tears to the Advent quest for Jesus.

This book, along with many other Creative Communications for the Parish products, is available on **amazon**kindle and **nook**  
by amazon.com

