

ADVENT DEVOTIONS

A
Little Child
SHALL
Lead Them



INSPIRATION FROM
HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah 11:6

It's a majestic vision of a kingdom beyond our imaginations—this unlikely cohesion and cooperation between opposing members of the animal kingdom—and with a child, no less, in their midst! Yet the prophet Isaiah poetically captures the promise of the peaceable kingdom initiated by the coming of the Messiah, “the Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). For with God, nothing is impossible.

In welcoming Advent, we prepare for the coming of the Christ Child at Christmas. Jesus Christ, God-Incarnate, arrives in our world as a defenseless Babe, born in Bethlehem.

Let us, too, allow this vision of *the* “little child,” who is Christ, to lead us through this season of peace, of hope, and of true renewal and rededication for serving God every day of our lives. It might seem impossible, but God loves us very much and loves proving things possible.

It is a pleasure to recommend this page-a-day devotional booklet, “A Little Child Shall Lead Them.” It brims with the wisdom of Scripture, paired with spiritual fruit harvested by beloved Christian writer Henri J.M. Nouwen, now capably shared anew through the perceptivity and prayers of author Elizabeth Scalia.

May you enjoy a blessed Advent,



Pat Gohn, *editor*

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

God's Intention

For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.

Acts 2:39

The promise of this silence is that new life can be born. It is this silence which is the silence of peace and prayer because it brings you back to the One who is leading you. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 38)

In Genesis, we read that all Creation began with intention, and we know that God's intention is always for the good—for what is alive and lives in light and proceeds ever forward. The intention of Creation had such force that even now the universe is still expanding, delivered into pulsing fullness like a child being born. As the universe is finding its fullness, so are we. Our lives expand throughout our days. Even in the physical diminishment of illness or age, the growth continues in mind and spirit. What a thing to comprehend—continual, perpetual fullness, even when we (and the world) are as yet incomplete. Delicious mystery comes to us bound in a fundamental lesson so suited to Advent: For an intention to be formed, and to grow and to persist, it must be rooted in affirmation; it must be born in the silent yet deliberate “yes” of our inmost being.

Creator God, help me to remember that your promise to me—and to all of us—began in the deep depths of your loving, omnipotent intention. Help me to cultivate a world of quietude and “yes” as I seek to hear your call. Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Come

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

Give me ears to listen to your small, soft voice saying: “Come to me ...” Let that loving voice be my guide. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 40)

We think of things as having beginnings and endings, and yet, even in life, we are in death, finding ourselves immersed in the changes of seasons and the death of circumstances. Even in death, in times of mourning, we are in life—still answering our own needs and the needs of others, still attending to our responsibilities, like gardeners to life. It is often arduous work; it involves picking up what is heavy when we may not feel strong, digging when we would prefer to be treading in the shallows, bending when we would prefer to be stubbornly erect, planting and nurturing when we would rather keep to ourselves, and a constant weeding away of what can choke out life—the life of the spirit—and leave us fruitless, hungry and ultimately in need. And yet, we are invited to bring our weary hearts and our sometimes reluctant or confused resolve to the One who has been there, done that and will each day be the place of safety and rest.

Lord Jesus, in these days of shortened light and increased activity, help me to listen, that I might hear your invitation to slow down and to linger within your quiet, ever-near presence. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Our Daily Invitation

Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you, you are my servant;
O Israel, do not forget me.

Isaiah 44:21

God wants to be admitted into the human heart, received with open hands, and loved with the same love with which we have been created. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 43)

We think again of Creation and of the loving intention with which our lives are brought forth and then accompanied by this great and fully Divine One who formed us. He then consented to the fully human formation of his Christ, who—despite his surprising, angel-heralded incarnation—never intrudes but awaits our daily invitation to companionship. He is the paradoxical Creator who does not presume upon his creatures. God seeks our consent, asks our consent, as Gabriel asked Mary. He is born and yet awaits our discovery. He knocks yet awaits our “yes.” Christ Jesus forces nothing on us, including his presence, but when he is welcomed, he answers our affirmation with his unending one, our sometimes-grudging offerings with extravagant generosity. Our every open hand is built upon; our every shared heart enlarges our lives and those lives we touch and thus do we expand and grow and flower and bear fruit. For nothing grows in “no.”

Christ Jesus, you are the very energy and essence of the Beautiful One who formed your servants within his bountiful will. Help me to remember that, and to remain open that you may flow within me and through me. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Evidence of God Working in Us

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

James 1:17

You are a person only when you are capable of standing open to all the gifts which are prepared for you. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 48)

Sometimes a cliché becomes one simply because it is true. One of them is that old chestnut, “God is never outdone in generosity.” How often have we heard of situations (or perhaps experienced in our lives) where someone in financial or emotional straits gave to another—gave from a place of need, as it were—only to find that need subsequently met in a timely, surprising and, dare we say, miraculous way? Our best and most generous instincts are evidence of God working from within us and through us. Our “yes” cooperates with God’s eternal and ongoing “yes,” and life and creation progress thusly. How wonderful to know that when we cooperate with God, we are met with, answered with and grown in his goodness in one way or another. We are preparing to meet Emmanuel, “God-with-Us,” who set his dwelling with us, asking to live within us, too, that we may be the hands, the feet, the consolation, the smile of Christ to the world.

Emmanuel, may I ponder the mystery of the process of the Incarnation, and how you live in me, move in me, with great thanksgiving and humility. Amen.

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

A Prayer Offering

For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we too are his offspring.”

Acts 17:28

For the gift is the life breath of God, the Spirit poured out on us through Jesus Christ. This life breath frees us from fear and gives us new room to live. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 51)

The days are growing shorter. Darkness comes earlier, and we turn on the lights and draw the shades—for if we do not, we are so easily seen. We know this because our neighbors do not always remember to do the same, and then we find ourselves observing them in secret—narrowing our eyes as we glimpse a different world, a space that is uniquely not ours—a sad or lonely movement that stirs us to prayer. The moon and stars beam and twinkle reflectively, but our reflections are fleeting. And yet, as our ancestors in faith did, we light candles. We pause and breathe in and then out, and our hunched shoulders unaccountably relax. Upon our breath we send forth a prayer of praise, and a prayer of longing, and of intercession where we can. In this ancient act, with our slowed pulse, we are able to make enough room to feel you, to make you welcome and rest in you.

Lord Jesus, in this moment, this is a pause of such poignancy because it brings all of what I perceive to you in prayer. I beg a blessing for me, for all of us. Amen.

FRIDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

All Prayer Is Good

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Proverbs 3:5-6

When you pray with hope, you turn yourself toward God, trusting fully that God is faithful and makes all promises real. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Open Hands*, 71)

Prayer is a funny thing. Sometimes the instinct to pray comes like a prompt we do not fully understand. We feel it and know we are being called to recollection and yet are unsure why. Sometimes we can simply ignore the feeling, and it will go away (for you, Lord, never nag), yet we always recall that we have let pass an urge to pray. Perhaps we weren't sure *what* to pray about. But all prayer is good. All connection to you, and with you, is good. Sometimes you nudge me to prayer simply because you want that connection—my attention, my awareness, my love—to do with whatever you will. Perhaps my brief prayerful attention may assist the world in some moment of battle between dark and light. Perhaps it may only assist my own soul. I need not know. It is enough to trust that when you tag my awareness, only good can come from you through me responding, in my saying “yes” for a moment, to be with you.

Lord, please help me to remember that it is not always important for me to know everything, that some things are not my business, and to trust in you. Amen.

SATURDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

God Really Knows Us

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Matthew 9:36

But the eyes of Christ which see the splendor of God's light are the same eyes which have seen the lowliness of God's people. The same eyes that penetrate God's eternal mystery have also seen into the innermost being of men and women, who are created in God's image. (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, 55)

“It was you who formed my inward parts ...” (Psalm 139:13). No wonder the Lord knows us through and through and is intimate with us in ways both spiritual and material. All matter is made up of spinning atoms; what ceases to spin, ceases to be. It grows cold and decomposes into something we think is nothing—ash which can never again burn with the fire of existent life. This touches on what we are promised in Scripture—the information from the angel to Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Existence is the antithesis of nothing. What exists, be it a tree, a river, a book, a human life at any stage, exists in God. The mover of the atoms, God is thus the giver of life, down to the microscopic and even smaller. With this power, “nothing” is impossible. That's worth remembering when we are feeling small and ignorable—hopeless, harassed and helpless.

O Christ, help me to remember and to claim my status as a true child of the All-Powerful. Amen.

A Little Child SHALL Lead Them

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In this Advent devotional, popular author, blogger and editor Elizabeth Scalia offers daily reflections on both Scripture and selected works of Henri J.M. Nouwen. With depth and clarity, this booklet prayerfully unpacks how God's divine love is best revealed through Jesus. Let this Advent season be one where the Child Jesus reveals the Father's love for you.



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