

Devotions for the Fourth Week of Advent

In this 4th week of Advent, we wait with expectant hope for the birth of the Christ child. We hear Mary sing with great joy in praise to God, telling of God's love and justice that turn the world upside down. Mary's song is often called "the Magnificat" (from the Latin word for "magnify" or "praise"), as her first words were, "My soul magnifies the Lord..."

Begin by lighting the 4 candles of your Advent wreath.

As you take a few slow, centering breaths, notice the branches you gathered (week 1), the lanterns you made (week 2), the candles you've lit, the wreath that holds them all in a circle that reminds us of God's never-ending love. Notice, as well, any other symbols of the season that are decorating your home. How have these visual reminders of Advent helped your reflections over the past weeks?

Sing one verse, proceed to the day's readings, and close with prayer

Song: "What Child Is This"

What child is this who, laid to rest,
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?

Refrain:

This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste to bring him laud,
the babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies he in such mean estate
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.

(Refrain)

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
come, peasant, king, to own him;
the King of kings salvation brings,
let loving hearts enthrone him.

(Refrain)



*Gerard van Honthorst
Adoration of the Shepherds (1692)
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Daily Verses and Questions for Reflection

Monday (20th): Luke 1:39-45

“Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 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. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’”

Reflect: God chose Mary, a seemingly insignificant girl from a seemingly insignificant town; yet she played a very significant role in God’s plan of salvation. There is great hope when we remember that God chooses ordinary people and places for God’s extraordinary Kingdom work to be done. No matter how “ordinary” my day is, what one thing can I do to share God’s extraordinary love with someone else?

Tuesday (21st): Luke 1:46-49

“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.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”

Reflect: To “magnify” something is to give it full focus and attention. Mary’s heart was solely focused on the Lord; and as a result, she is overcome with pure, unadulterated joy which is deeply connected to the love of God. Mary’s words reflect a deep assurance that the Lord is with her and at work in her life always. What distraction(s) keep me from recognizing the Lord’s presence in my life? How can I choose joy today?

Wednesday (22nd): Luke 1:50-52

“My soul magnifies the Lord...
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;”

Reflect: Mary's song contains profound, prophetic words that signal a new Kingdom where God's righteousness reigns - where power and status mean nothing, and where material riches are understood to be impediments to salvation, not marks of success – turning the world's values upside down. How can I offer hope to someone who is facing oppression or injustice?

Thursday (23rd): Luke 1:53-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
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.”

Reflect: Mary's song emphasizes how God has lifted the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. It is a picture of a God who has a heart for the underdog; a God who is concerned about people who've been made to feel like nobodies. God lifts them up, and as disciples, we, too, are called to do the same. How can I be a light of God's hope to someone in need?

Friday (24th) – Christmas Eve

For Today, you may wish to sing a verse of “Silent Night”

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.
'Round yon Virgin Mother and Child,
Holy Infant so tender and mild.
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Text: Luke 2: 8-10

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...”

Reflect: The “good news of great joy for all the people” was given first to shepherds, people who were often criticized and marginalized in first century Palestine. Christ's coming is good news for all. Ask God to help you pay more attention to people who often go unnoticed. In the spirit of Christ's love, do an act of kindness for a stranger today.

Closing Prayer

CHRISTMAS BLESSING

I will light candles this Christmas
Candles of joy, despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all my living.
Candles that will burn all the year long.
– Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*

Background on this week's Hymns

“What Child Is This?”

This well-loved hymn was written in 1865 by William Chatterton Dix, an Anglican layman and businessman, who wrote it after undergoing a spiritual reawakening following a severe illness. The song poetically begins with a rhetorical question, *What child is this?*, then paints an image of the Nativity scene (taken from Luke 2:8-16), and progressively points us to the nature of Christ's ministry and his divinity. In 1871, the poem was set to the tune of “Greensleeves,” a traditional, 16th century, English folk song.

“Silent Night”

The words to “Silent Night” (“Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht”) were written in 1816 by Joseph Mohr, a young priest in Austria. Mohr's inspiration came after walking through the quiet, winter-laden town that was now at peace following the Napoleonic wars. The melody was written by Franz Xaver Gruber, a choir director and colleague of Mohr. On Christmas Eve of 1818, “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” was first performed by Mohr and Gruber at St. Nicholas parish church in the village of Oberndorf. The carol was sung by traveling folk singers through northern Europe, and its popularity grew, eventually debuting in New York City in 1839. The composition of this hymn evolved and has been translated into over 300 languages.