

The image features two lit red candles against a dark, gradient background. The candle in the foreground is larger and more prominent, with a bright, yellow-orange flame. The second candle is smaller and positioned behind it to the left. The overall mood is warm and contemplative.

*Waiting
for God*

ADVENT REFLECTION AND PRAYER WITH
HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

INTRODUCTION

In our fast-paced modern world we expect instant communication through mobile phones and high-speed Internet and seek immediate gratification of our needs through shopping. Waiting is both a lost art and very low on our values list. Thus developing the proper religious perspective for the waiting that characterizes the Church's season of Advent requires a new approach and the renewal of a more ancient tradition. In this little booklet, we draw upon the insights of Fr. Henri J.M. Nouwen (1932-1996), one of the most important spiritual writers of the last half of the twentieth century, to help us learn anew how to wait for God's coming.

Nouwen introduces us to a spirituality of waiting that is active and not just passive. He reminds us that "Active waiting implies being fully present to the moment with the conviction that something is happening where we are and that we want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, believing that this moment is the moment."

He invites us to focus our full attention on God's coming once again into our hearts and lives as he did over two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. "Advent will offer the opportunity to deepen your memory of God's great deeds in time and will set you free to look forward with courage to the fulfillment of time by him who came and is still to come."

Thus all of our Advent activities—finding daily silent times for listening to God's Word in Scripture, reflecting and praying about the Good News of Jesus' surprising presence with us, anticipating and then rejoicing when we discover his presence anew in us and in those around us—offer many new possibilities for a relationship with God that will transform us and our lives during the coming year.

—Steve Mueller
Editor

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

WAITING FOR GOD

“Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” —Psalm 27:14

In our personal lives, waiting is not a very popular pastime. Waiting is not something we anticipate or experience with great joy and gladness! In fact, most of us consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, “Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don’t just sit there and wait!” So, for us and for many people, waiting is a dry desert between where we are and where we want to be. We do not enjoy such a place. We want to move out of it and do something worthwhile.



In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere around us is fear. We as a people are afraid—afraid of other people who may be different, afraid of inner or uncomfortable feelings, and also afraid of an unknown future. As fearful people we have a hard time waiting, because fear urges us to get away from where we are. If we find that we cannot flee, we may fight instead. We are aware of the many destructive acts that arise from our fear that something harmful will be done to us.

Jesus, help me to wait for you to break anew into my life today so that...

MONDAY, WEEK I

WAITING WITH PROMISE

“But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” —2 Peter 3:13

Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. Those who were waiting had each received a promise that gave them courage and allowed them to wait. They received something that was at work in them, a seed that had started to grow.

This is very important for us because we too can wait only if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. Waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon, and Anna were living with a promise. It was a promise that nurtured them, fed them, and enabled them to stay where they were. By their waiting, the promise could gradually unfold and realize itself within them and through them. They were present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.”

They were filled with hope. Their hope was something very different. Their hope was trusting that fulfillment would come, but fulfillment according to the promises of God and not just according to their wishes. Hope is always open-ended.

*Jesus, help me not to fear and to trust in your promise to be with us.
Today I will...*

TUESDAY, WEEK I

OPEN-ENDED WAITING

“And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in you.”

—*Psalm 39:7*

Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something that we wish to have, but we do not know if or when we will have it. It is not concrete. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: “I wish that I had a job. I wish the weather were better. I wish the pain would go away.”

We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. What will life be like if I do not get the things I wish for? One of the reasons we have such a hard time waiting is that we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place and thus satisfy our wishes. Here we realize how our wishes tend to be connected with our fears, and fear, of course, prevents us from allowing time in our lives for open-ended waiting. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future.



Jesus, help me to be ready for how your presence will change me. Today I will...

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 1

HOPEFUL WAITING

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.”

—Psalm 130:5

I have found it very important in my own life to try to let go of my wishes and instead to live in hope. I am finding that when I choose to let go of my sometimes petty and superficial wishes and trust that my life is precious and meaningful in the eyes of God something really new, something beyond my own expectations begins to happen for me.

To wait with openness and trust is an enormously radical attitude toward life. It is choosing to hope that something is happening for us that is far beyond our own imaginings. It is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life. It is living with the conviction that God molds us in love, holds us in tenderness, and moves us away from the sources of our fear.



Our spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, expecting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination or prediction. This, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

Jesus, help me be ready when new things begin to happen so that...

THURSDAY, WEEK 1

WAITING IN THE DARKNESS

“We wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.” —Isaiah 59:9

As long as we are still wondering what other people say or think about us and trying to act in ways that will elicit a positive response, we are still victimized and imprisoned by the dark world in which we live. In that dark world we have to let our surroundings tell us what we are worth. It is the world of successes and failures, of trophies and expulsions, of praise and blame, of stars and underdogs. In this world we are easily hurt and we easily act out of these hurts to find some satisfaction of our need to be considered worthwhile.

As long as we are in the clutches of that world, we live in darkness, since we do not know our true self. We cling to our false self in the hope that maybe more success, more praise, more satisfaction will give us the experience of being loved, which we crave. That is the fertile ground of bitterness, greed, violence, and war.

In prayer, however, again and again we discover that the love we are looking for has already been given to us and that we can come to the experience of that love. There, in the first love, lies our true self, a self not made up of the rejections and acceptances of those with whom we live, but solidly rooted in the One who called us into existence. In the house of God we were created. To that house we are called to return. Prayer is the act of returning.

Jesus, be with me in my dark times and be my light. Today I will...

WAITING IN THE SILENCE

“For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken.”

—Psalm 62:1-2

O Lord Jesus, your words to your Father were born out of your silence. Lead me into this silence, so that my words may be spoken in your name and thus be fruitful. It is so hard to be silent, silent with my mouth, but even more, silent with my heart.

There is so much talking going on within me. It seems that I am always involved in inner debates with myself, my friends, my enemies, my supporters, my opponents, my colleagues, and my rivals. But this inner debate reveals how far my heart is from you. If I were simply to rest at your feet and realize that I belong to you and you alone,



I would easily stop arguing with all the real and imagined people around me.

These arguments show my insecurity, my fear, my apprehensions, and my need for being recognized and receiving attention. You, O

Lord, will give me all the attention I need if I would simply stop talking and start listening to you. I know that in the silence of my heart you will speak to me and show me your love. Give me, O Lord, that silence. Let me be patient and grow slowly into this silence in which I can be with you. Amen.

Jesus, help me be quiet in your presence so that with you I...

SATURDAY, WEEK I

EVERYTHING IS GRACE

“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? —1 Corinthians 4:7

I am gradually learning that the call to gratitude asks us to say, “Everything is grace.” Gratitude is not a simple emotion or an obvious attitude. Living gratefully requires practice. It takes sustained effort to reclaim my whole past as the concrete way God has led me to this moment. For in doing so I must face not only today’s hurts, but the past’s experiences of rejection or abandonment or failure or fear. While Jesus told his followers that they were intimately related to him as branches are to a vine, they still needed to be pruned to bear more fruit (see John 15:1-5).

Pruning means cutting, reshaping, removing what diminishes vitality. When we look at a pruned vineyard, we can hardly believe it will bear fruit. But when harvest comes, we realize that the pruning allowed the vines to concentrate their energy and produce more grapes.

Grateful people learn to celebrate even amid life’s hard and harrowing memories because they know that pruning is no mere punishment, but preparation. When our gratitude for the past is only partial, our hope for the future can likewise never be full. But our submitting to God’s pruning work will not ultimately leave us sad, but hopeful for what can happen in us and through us.

Jesus, come and root out all that keeps me from you so that...



IN MY WEAKNESS IS STRENGTH

“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” —2 Corinthians 12:9-10

I have made an inner decision to keep looking at Jesus as the one who calls us to the heart of God, a heart that knows only love. It is from that perspective that I reflect on everything Jesus says, including his harsh statements. Jesus created divisions, but I have chosen to believe that these divisions were the result not of intolerance or fanaticism but of his radical call to love, forgive, and be reconciled.



Every time I have an opportunity to create understanding between people and foster moments of healing, forgiving, and uniting, I will try to do it, even though

I might be criticized as too soft, too bending, too appeasing. Is this desire a lack of fervor and zeal for the truth? Is it an unwillingness to be a martyr? Is it spinelessness?

I am not always sure what comes from my weakness and what comes from my strength. Probably I will never know. But I have to trust that, after sixty-four years of life, I have some ground to stand on, a ground where Jesus stands with me. And when divisions arise against my desire, I have to find the courage to live them as lovingly as I tried to prevent them; then Jesus' harsh words might prove consoling.

Jesus, help me bring healing and forgiveness to others. Today I will...

MONDAY, WEEK 2

COME BACK TO ME

“Thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me.” —Jeremiah 15:19

To return to God means to return to God with all that I am and all that I have. I cannot return to God with just half of my being. God’s love is a jealous love. God wants not just a part of me, but all of me. Only when I surrender myself completely to God’s parental love can I expect to be free from endless distractions, ready to hear the voice of love, and able to recognize my own unique call.

It is going to be a very long road. Every time I pray, I feel the struggle. It is the struggle of letting God be the God of my whole being. It is the struggle to trust that true freedom lies hidden in total surrender to God’s love.



Following Jesus is the way to enter into the struggle and find true freedom. The way is the way of the cross, and true freedom is the freedom found in the victory over death. Jesus’ total obedience to his Father led him to the cross, and through the cross to a life no longer subject to the competitive games of this world. Jesus held on to nothing, not even to satisfying religious experiences. In this complete surrender he found total unity and total freedom.

Jesus, today I give my whole self to you, holding nothing back so that...

NOW IS THE TIME FOR CHANGE

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” —Mark 1:14-15

Living a spiritual life requires a change of heart, a conversion. Such a conversion may be marked by a sudden inner change, or it can take place through a long, quiet process of transformation. But it always involves an inner experience of oneness. We realize that we are in the center, and that from there all that is and all that takes place can be seen and understood as part of the mystery of God’s life with us.

Our conflicts and pains, our tasks and promises, our families and friends, our activities and projects, our hopes and aspirations, no longer appear to us as a fatiguing variety of things which we can barely keep together, but rather as affirmations and revelations of the new life of the Spirit in us. “All these other things”, which so occupied and preoccupied us, now come as gifts or challenges that strengthen and deepen the new life which we have discovered.

This does not mean that the spiritual life makes things easier or takes our struggles and pains away. The lives of Jesus’ disciples clearly show that suffering does not diminish because of conversion. Sometimes it even becomes more intense. But our attention is no longer directed to the “more or less”. What matters is to listen attentively to the Spirit and to go obediently where we are being led, whether to a joyful or a painful place.

Jesus, give me courage to trust where you are now leading me. Today I will...

SAYING “YES” TO GOD

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”—Luke 1:38

My prayer life has been quite difficult lately. During my morning meditation I think about a thousand things except God and God’s presence in my life. I am worrying, brooding, and agonizing, but not really praying.



To my own surprise the only prayer that offers me some peace and consolation is the prayer to Mary. As I tried to simply be with Mary and listen to her words, I discovered a restful peace. Instead of thinking about these words and trying to understand them, I just listened to them being spoken for me.

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. She responded with a complete surrender and thus became not only the mother of Jesus but also the mother of all who believe in him.

I keep listening to these words as words that summarize the deepest possible response to God’s loving action within us. God wants to let the Holy Spirit guide our lives, but are we prepared to let it happen? Just being with Mary and the angel and hearing their words—words which changed the course of history—bring me peace and rest.

Jesus, “yes, yes,” come and be born in me today so that...

THURSDAY, WEEK 2

FACING MY HIDDEN SELF

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”
—Psalm 139:23-24

My prayers hide more than they reveal. They reveal a fearful heart, a cry for mercy, rays of hope, the power of the Spirit, the needs of the world, and finally gratitude. They even reveal a movement from a self-preoccupied introspection to the beginning of an inner freedom that offers space for the pains of others and responds to grace with gratitude. But I have come to realize that what remains hidden is prayer.

Rereading these prayers, I now see that my words are no more than the walls that surround a silent place. These prayers are only the context for prayer. If anything has become clear, it is that I cannot pray, but that the Spirit of God prays in me. This divine prayer cannot be expressed in words, it dwells in the silence before, between and beyond the words of a searching heart.

Prayer is the breathing of God’s Spirit in us. Prayer is the cry of the Spirit, “Abba, Father,” coming from the innermost depths of our being. Prayer is the divine life in us, a life of which we are only dimly aware and which transcends the capacities of all our senses. Thus I must say that these prayers hide the prayer of God, which can never be printed in a book.

Jesus, breathe your Spirit in me and give me new life so that...

“I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU”

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” —Jeremiah 31:3

Jesus came to open my ears to another voice that says, “I am your God, I have molded you with my own hands, and I love what I have made. I love you with a love that has no limits, because I love you as I am loved. Do not run away from me. Come back to me—not once, not twice, but always again. You are my child. How can you ever doubt that I will embrace you again, hold you against my breast, kiss you and let my hands run through your hair? I am your God—the God of mercy and compassion, the God of pardon and love, the God of tenderness and care. Please do not say that I have given up on you, that I cannot stand you anymore, that there is no way back. It is not true. I so much want you to be with me. I so much want you to be close to me. I know all your thoughts. I hear all your words. I see all of your actions. And I love you because you are beautiful, made in my own image, an expression of my most intimate love. Come, come, let me wipe your tears, and let my mouth come close to your ear and say to you, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’”

O God, help me to listen to your voice of love and mercy so that...



LISTEN TO YOUR HEART

“If God calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’”
—1 Samuel 3:9

Listen to your heart. It's there that Jesus speaks most intimately to you. Praying is first and foremost listening to Jesus who dwells in the very depths of your heart. He doesn't shout. He doesn't thrust himself upon you. His voice is an unassuming voice, very nearly a whisper, the voice of a gentle love. Whatever you do with your life, go on listening to the voice of Jesus in your heart. This listening must be an active and very attentive listening, for in our restless and noisy world God's so loving voice is easily drowned out. You need to set aside some time every day for this active listening to God if only for ten minutes. Ten minutes each day for Jesus alone can bring about a radical change in your life.

You'll find that it isn't easy to be still for ten minutes at a time. You'll discover straightaway that many other voices, voices that are very noisy and distracting, voices which do not come from God, demand your attention. But if you stick to your daily prayer time, then slowly but surely you'll come to hear the gentle voice of love and will long more and more to listen to it.

Listening will help you to get to know Jesus in a very intimate way, make you aware of the unique manner in which he is calling you, and give you the courage to follow him even to places where you'd rather not go. Living with Jesus is a great adventure. It's the adventure of love.

Jesus, help me to listen for your quiet voice within me. Today I will...

GOD'S HIDDEN PRESENCE IN ME

“Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.” —Psalm 33:20-22

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, much in our fleeting lives is not passing but lasting, not dying but coming to life, not temporary but eternal. Amid the fragility of our lives, we have wonderful reason to hope.

Some call this hidden reality “grace,” others “God’s life in us,” others still “the kingdom of God among us.” Whatever the name you give, once you focus your eyes and ears on the precious center you start to realize that all the torrents of time and circumstance that roll over it serve only to polish it into a precious, imperishable gift. Anyone who believes, Jesus reminds us, has eternal life (John 6:40). That is the enormous revolution, that in this fleeting, temporary world he comes to plant the seed of eternal life. In many ways that is what is meant by the term the spiritual life—the nurturing of the eternal amid the temporal, the lasting within the passing, God’s presence in the human family. It is the life of the divine Spirit within us.

Become aware of this mysterious presence and life turns around. You sense joy even as others nurse complaints, you experience peace while the world conspires in war, and you find hope even when headlines broadcast despair. You discover a deep love even while the air around you seems pervaded by hatred.



Jesus, help me discover your hidden presence around and in me so that...

MEETING JESUS IN MYSELF

“Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” —Psalm 10:1

The truth, that Jesus makes himself known to you in secret, requires that you start looking for him in your own seclusion. It is his seclusion, his hiddenness, that invites you to enter into your own.

And here we’re back again with the mystery of our own heart. Our heart is at the center of our being human. There our deepest thoughts, intuitions, emotions and decisions find their source. But



it’s also there that we are often most alienated from ourselves. We know little or nothing of our own heart. We keep our distance, as though we were afraid of it. What is most intimate is also what frightens us most. Where we are most ourselves, we are often strangers to ourselves. That is the painful part of our being human. We fail to know our hidden centers; and so

we live and die often without knowing who we really are. If we ask ourselves why we think, feel and act in such or such a way, we often have no answer, thus proving to be strangers in our own house.

The mystery of the spiritual life is that Jesus desires to meet us in the seclusion of our own heart, to make his love known to us there, to free us from our fears and to make our own deepest self known to us. In the privacy of our heart, therefore, we can learn not only to know Jesus but, through Jesus, ourselves as well.

Jesus, I want so much to meet you, so come to me today so that...

TUESDAY, WEEK 3

MAKING SPACE FOR GOD

“I call upon you, O LORD; come quickly to me; give ear to my voice when I call to you.” —Psalm 141:1

The spiritual life demands making available the inner space where God can touch you with an all-transforming love. We are so faint-hearted that we have a lot of trouble leaving an empty space empty. We like to fill it all up with ideas, plans, duties, tasks, and activities.

People are so hard-pressed nowadays. It's as though they're tearing about from one emergency to another. Never solitary, never still, never really free but always busy about something that just can't wait. You get the impression that, amid this frantic hurly-burly, we lose touch with life itself. We have the experience of being busy while nothing real seems to happen. The more agitated we are, and the more compacted our lives become, the more difficult it is to keep a space where God can let something truly new take place.

The discipline of the heart helps us to let God into our hearts so that God can become known to us there, in the deepest recesses of our own being. This is not so easy to do; we like to be master in our own house and don't want to admit that our house is God's house too. God wants to be together with us where we really live and, by loving us there, to show us the way to be a complete human being. God's love is a demanding, even a jealous love, and when we let that love speak within us, we are led into places where we would often rather not go.

Jesus, fill the empty space in my heart with your love so that...

WEDNESDAY, WEEK 3

DARE TO CARE

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” —1 Thessalonians 2:8

To care means first of all to be present to each other. From experience you know that those who care for you become present to you. When they listen, they listen to you. When they speak, you know they speak to you. And when they ask questions, you know it is for your sake and not for their own. Their presence is a healing presence because they accept you on your terms, and they encourage you to take your own life seriously and to trust your own vocation.

Our tendency is to run away from the painful realities or to try to change them as soon as possible. But cure without care makes us into rulers, controllers, manipulators, and prevents a real community from taking shape. Cure without care makes us preoccupied with quick changes, impatient and unwilling to share each other's burden. And so cure can often become offending instead of liberating.

It is therefore not so strange that cure is not seldom refused by people in need. Not only have individuals refused help when they did not sense a real care, but also oppressed minorities have resisted support, and suffering nations have declined medicine and food when they realized that it was better to suffer than to lose self-respect by accepting a gift out of a non caring hand.

Jesus, I know you care for me, so help me really care for others. Today I will...

THURSDAY, WEEK 3

SOMETHING IS HAPPENING HERE

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

—Isaiah 43:19

Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort. I want to let you know that I love you even though I do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you even though I often experience despair. Let this be a little dying I can do with you and for you as a way of experiencing some solidarity with the millions in this world who suffer far more than I do. Amen.

Jesus, help me know how you are changing me from within so that...



WAITING WITH OTHERS

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”—Matthew 18:20

Prayer as a hopeful and joyful waiting for God is a really unhuman or superhuman task unless we realize that we do not have to wait alone.

In the community of faith we can find the climate and the support to sustain and deepen our prayer and we are enabled to constantly look forward beyond our immediate and often narrowing private needs. The community of faith offers the protective boundaries within which we can listen to our deepest longings, not to indulge in morbid introspection, but to find our God to whom they point. In the community of faith we can listen to our feelings of loneliness, to our desires for an embrace or a kiss, to our sexual urges, to our cravings for sympathy, compassion or just a good word; also to our search for insight and to our hope for companionship and friendship.

In the community of faith we can listen to all these longings and find the courage, not to avoid them or cover them up, but to confront them in order to discern God's presence in their midst. There we can affirm each other in our waiting and also in the realization that in the center of our waiting the first intimacy with God is found. There we can be patiently together and let the suffering of each day convert our illusions into the prayer of a contrite people. The community of faith is indeed the climate and source of all prayer.

Jesus, help me share myself more fully with those around me so that...

DAILY SOLITUDE WITH JESUS

“Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” —John 17:24

It is better to have a daily practice of ten minutes’ solitude than to have a whole hour once in a while. It is better to become familiar with one posture than to keep experimenting with different ones. Simplicity and regularity are the best guides in finding our way. They allow us to make the discipline of solitude as much part of our daily lives as eating and sleeping. When that happens, our noisy worries will slowly lose their power over us and the renewing activity of God’s Spirit will slowly make its presence known.



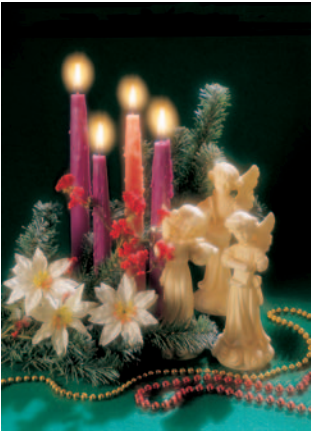
Although the discipline of solitude asks us to set aside time and space, what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do. The more we train ourselves to spend time with God and Him alone, the more we will discover that God is with us at all times and in all places. Then we will be able to recognize Him even in the midst of a busy and active life. Once the solitude of time and space has become a solitude of the heart, we will never have to leave that solitude. We will be able to live the spiritual life in any place and any time. Thus the discipline of solitude enables us to live active lives in the world, while remaining always in the presence of the living God.

Jesus, help me to remain in your presence throughout the day so that...

REJOICE, THE LORD IS NEAR!

“Let all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. Let those who love your salvation say evermore, “God is great!” —Psalm 70:4

What strikes me is that waiting is a period of learning. The longer we wait the more we hear about him for whom we are waiting. As the Advent weeks progress, we hear more and more about the beauty and splendor of the One who is to come. The Gospel passages read this week all talk about the events before Jesus’ birth and the people ready to receive him. Isaiah heaps prophecy on prophecy to strengthen and deepen our hope, and the songs, lessons, commentaries, and antiphons all compete in their attempt to set the stage for the Lord who is to come.



There is a stark beauty about it all. But is this not a preparation that can only lead to an anticlimax? I don’t think so. Advent does not lead to nervous tension stemming from expectation of something spectacular about to happen. On the contrary, it leads to a growing inner stillness and joy allowing me to realize that he for whom I am waiting has already arrived and speaks to me in the silence of my heart.

Just as a mother feels the child grow in her and is not surprised on the day of the birth but joyfully receives the one she learned to know during her waiting, so Jesus can be born in my life slowly and steadily and be received as the one I learned to know while waiting.

Jesus, I await your coming more fully into my life so that now...

MONDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

JESUS, GOD-WITH-US

“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

—Matthew 1:23-24

God has become human so as to be able, in all completeness, to live with us, suffer with us and die with us. We have found in Jesus a fellow human being who is so completely one with us that not a single weakness, pain or temptation has remained foreign to him. Precisely because Jesus is God and without any sin, he is able to experience our sinful, broken human condition so thoroughly that we may say he knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we love ourselves.

No one else, however well disposed, is ever in a position to be with us so completely that we feel ourselves to be understood and loved without limit. We humans remain too self-centered to be able to forget ourselves fully for the other person's sake. But Jesus does give himself fully, he holds nothing back for himself, he wants to be with us in so total a fashion that we can never again feel alone. Jesus is the compassionate God who comes so close to us in our weakness that we can turn to him without fear.

When you stand before God, vulnerable as you are, and let him see all there is of you, you will begin gradually to experience for yourself what it means that God has sent Jesus to be, in all things, God-with-you.

Jesus, help me hold nothing back in my love for you and for others so that...

TUESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

NOW JESUS LIVES AGAIN IN US

“It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.” —2 Corinthians 1:21-22

In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our lives in the most intimate way, so that we could enter into his life through the Spirit.

In Jesus, God became one of us to lead us through Jesus into the intimacy of his divine life. Jesus came to us to become as we are and left us to allow us to become as he is. By giving us his Spirit, his breath, he became closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is through this breath of God that we can call God “Abba, Father” and can become part of the mysterious divine relationship between Father and Son. Praying in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, therefore, means participating in the intimate life of God himself.



There is probably no image that expresses so well the intimacy with God in prayer as the image of God's breath. We are like asthmatic people who are

cured of their anxiety. The Spirit has taken away our narrowness (the Latin word for anxiety is *angustia* = narrowness) and made everything new for us. We receive a new breath, a new freedom, a new life. This new life is the divine life of God himself. Prayer, therefore, is God's breathing in us, by which we become part of the intimacy of God's inner life, and by which we are born anew.

Jesus, thank you for becoming one with us to give us your divine life. Today I will...

WEDNESDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

TRANSFORMED AND SENT BY GOD'S LOVE

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” —John 20:21-22

When the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples and dwells with them, their lives are transformed into Christ-like lives, lives shaped by the same love that exists between the Father and the Son. The spiritual life is indeed a life in which we are lifted up to become part-takers of the divine love.

To be lifted up into the divine life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit does not mean, however, to be taken out of the world. On the contrary, those who have entered into the spiritual life are precisely the ones who are sent into the world to continue and fulfill the work that Jesus began. The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it.

Jesus makes it clear that precisely because His disciples no longer belong to the world, they can live in the world as He did: Life in the Spirit of Jesus is therefore a life in which Jesus' coming into the world—His incarnation, His death and resurrection—is lived out by those who have entered into the same obedient relationship to the Father which marked Jesus' own life. Having become sons and daughters as Jesus was Son, our lives become a continuation of Jesus' mission.

Jesus, filled with your Spirit, lead me more fully into your loving ways so that...

THURSDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF IT

“I am not asking you to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.” —John 17:15-16

Being in the world without being of the world: these words summarize well the way Jesus speaks of the spiritual life. It is a life in which we are totally transformed by the Spirit of love. Yet it is a life in which everything seems to remain the same.

To live a spiritual life does not mean that we must leave our families, give up our jobs, or change our ways of working; it does not mean that we have to withdraw from social or political activities, or lose interest in literature and art; it does not require severe forms of asceticism or long hours of prayer. Changes such as these may in fact grow out of our spiritual life, and for some people radical decisions may be necessary.

But the spiritual life can be lived in as many ways as there are people. What is new is that we have moved from the many things to the kingdom of God. What is new is that we are set free from the compulsions of our world and have set our hearts on the only necessary thing. What is new is that we no longer experience the many things, people, and events as endless causes for worry but begin to experience them as the rich variety of ways in which God makes His presence known to us.

Jesus, help me find my own new way to live with you so that...



GIVING OUR WHOLE SELF TO GOD

“This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” —Philippians 1:9-11

The mystery of life is that the Lord of life cannot be known except in and through the act of living. Without the concrete and specific involvements of daily life we cannot come to know the loving presence of him who holds us in the palm of his hand.

Our limited acts of love reveal to us his unlimited love. Our small gestures of care reveal his boundless care. Our fearful and hesitant words reveal his fearless and guiding Word. It is indeed through our broken, vulnerable, mortal ways of being that the healing power of the eternal God becomes visible to us.



Therefore, we are called each day to present to our Lord the whole of our lives—our joys as well as sorrows, our successes as well as failures, our hopes as well as fears. We are called to do so with our limited means, our stuttering words and halting expressions. In this way, we will come to know in mind and heart the unceasing prayer of God’s Spirit in us. Our many prayers are in fact confessions of our inability to pray. But they are confessions that enable us to perceive the merciful presence of God.

Jesus, I am yours, my life is yours, lead me where you want so that...

SATURDAY, CHRISTMAS WEEK

JESUS, I WANT TO BE WITH YOU

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

—John 20:29

There, O Lord, is the mystery of your love. I have not seen you and yet I truly see you every time I look at the broken bodies of my fellow human beings. I have not heard you, and yet I truly hear you every time I hear the cries uttered by men, women and children in pain. I have not touched you, and yet I truly touch you every time I touch all those who come to me in their loneliness. In the midst of all the human brokenness and human pain, I see, hear and touch the heart of humanity, your humanity, the humanity of all the people embraced by your love.



Thank you, Jesus, for your heart. Thank you for showing me your heart. Thank you for letting me see while not seeing, hear while not hearing, touch while not

touching. Thank you for letting me believe more every day, hope more every day and love more every day.

My heart is little, fearful and very timid. It will always be so. But you say, “Come to my heart. My heart is gentle and humble and very broken like yours. Do not be afraid. Come and let your heart find rest in mine and trust that all will be well.” I want to come, Jesus, and be with you. Here I am, Lord, take my heart and let it become a heart filled with your love.

Jesus, help me give up my hesitations and fears and follow you so that...

AN ADVENT PRAYER

Jesus, listen to my prayer. I feel like I am groping in the dark. It is hard for me simply to be quiet and present in your presence. My mind is so chaotic, so full of dispersed ideas, plans, memories, and fantasies. I want to be with you and you alone, concentrate on your Word, listen to your voice, and look at you as you reveal yourself to your friends. But even with the best intentions I wander off to less important things and discover that my heart is drawn to my own little worthless treasures. I cannot pray without the power of your Spirit. I am waiting, I am expecting, I am hoping. Do not leave me without your Spirit. Amen.

—Henri Nouwen
(1932-1996)

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WHY GOD CAME TO US AS A BABY

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” —Luke 2:12

God says, “I love you with an everlasting love,” and Jesus came to tell us that. We are the Beloved, not because we did anything, not because we proved ourselves. Basically, God loves us whatever we do. If that’s true, these few years that we are in the world, we are sent to say, in the midst of our life, “Yes, God, I love you, too.”



Just as God cares for us, it’s very important that we care for God in the world. If God is born like a little baby, God cannot walk or speak unless someone teaches God. That’s the story of Jesus, who needs human beings in order to

grow. God is saying, “I want to be weak so you can love me. What better way to help you respond to my love than becoming weak so you can care for me?” God becomes a stumbling God who falls at the cross, who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. God does this so that we can get close. The God who loves us is a God who becomes vulnerable, dependent in the manger and dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, “Are you there for me?”

Jesus, be with me each day to discover your presence in others so that...