



Advent Devotional
December 2 - December 25 | 2018



Redemption Church Frisco | Anglican
To equip and encourage people in all areas of life
to *live* Kingdom First
every day | of every week | of every year

Dedicated to our Savior whose love is boundless,
whose sacrifice is perfect,
whose mercy and kindness never end

Dedicated to the people of Redemption Church
whom we love dearly in the Lord

Dedicated to our Bishop Todd Hunter
whose non-anxious presence
and selfless dedication to Jesus and
to the Church inspire us to be
more like Jesus

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Introduction

This devotional was written to help people live into the fulness of the Advent season. This is a season of waiting and preparation. The devotional is filled with direction and reflection to help make our times of waiting into times of preparation. These writings are meant to help us ready our hearts for the coming of Jesus, but also transform how we approach and live into periods of waiting in our lives.

Overview of the Devotional

Part 1: The Meaning of Advent - a brief description of the season along with an explanation of the theme of waiting

Part 2: The Prayers of Advent - 4 prayers to be used along with lighting the candles of the Advent wreath. This includes a special prayer for children that can be used each evening.

Part 3: The Acts of Waiting - a definition of what these Acts are and how one might practice them tied to the daily devotions. This includes examples of different Acts of Waiting in all four categories.

Part 4: The Devotional - daily readings (Monday-Friday) that reflect upon one of the Acts of Waiting in the life of a Biblical figure. The first devotional begins on Monday December 3. Following each devotional reading, one is encouraged to practice a particular Act of Waiting that coincides with the material for that day.

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Part 1: The Meaning Of Advent

The word “advent” means “coming.” This season focuses us upon the birth of Jesus as the Christ (his first advent) and his return as King (his second advent).

In Advent we prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus. We celebrate his birth on one of the shortest and therefore darkest days of the year. At the birth of Christ, the Light of the World pierced this darkness, and we are reminded that Jesus will come again and bring perpetual light in the new heavens and new earth. In this season we ready our hearts to receive the baby Jesus on Christmas morning and the resurrected Lord Jesus when He comes again.

Our theme during Advent this year is waiting. Everyone waits, though most of us do not wait well. Waiting halts our plans, impedes our ambitions and causes great anxiety. But what if we could have peace in our times of waiting? As crazy as that sounds, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and the Magi all waited with peace. As we wait to celebrate the first coming of Jesus on Christmas morning, currently wait for the second coming of Jesus, and face other times of waiting throughout our lives, we can wait now knowing the peace they knew then.

Part 2: The Prayers of Advent

Week 1 (12/2-8)

Hope / Presence

Holy Father, as Your Son came into our world in great humility to bring light into darkness, may we know his loving and guiding presence that shines brightly in our hardest moments; because Your Son is always present with us, we always have hope; help us by Your Spirit to become more present to You and to others as we wait for His coming; we ask through Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Week 2 (12/9-15)

Faith / Self-Denial

Gracious Father, Your dear Son lived in complete submission to You all His life, ever denying Himself and serving others that he might glorify You and show Himself faithful in always trusting you; give us the faith to deny ourselves and live for you all our days as we wait for His coming; we ask through Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Week 3 (12/16-22)*Joy / Obedience*

Almighty God, Whose only Son lived a life of complete obedience to Your commands and Who knew the joy of walking always in Your ways, by Your Spirit grant us to live in obedience to You above all else that we might share in His joy as we wait for His coming; we ask through Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Week 4 (12/23-24)*Love / Contemplation*

Loving Father, as the Magi came to adore Your blessed Son Whom You sent out of Your great love for the world, may we faithfully contemplate the wonder of that love and cultivate our own love for You and for others as we wait for His coming; we ask through Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

A Prayer For Children

Dear Jesus, as we light the candle(s) on this Advent wreath, may the light of your presence bring joy to our hearts. Bless our family and our friends, and be with all those who are in need this holiday season. Amen.

Part 3: Acts of Waiting

As we approach this Advent season and journey through it, our goal is to become better at waiting. What is meant by better?

While waiting can be annoying and even cause anxiety at times, waiting is also an important part of spiritual development. God can use our times of waiting as times of preparation even as He did with John the Baptist. It is instructive that before Jesus came on the scene, God sent John the Baptist. The gospel writers tell us that John was sent as "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight" (Luke 3:4).

The people who had waited so many years for the coming of the Messiah had to wait still longer, and this longer waiting was actually God's plan to prepare the people. They were not ready to receive Christ. They needed time to reflect and repent, time to get their hearts and minds in a right place in order to respond rightly to Jesus.

In our waiting, God can prepare us; God can speak to us; God can reveal truth to us. In our waiting, the Holy Spirit can work in our lives helping us move closer to being like Christ.

Advent is a time of waiting. We hope the devotional and the Acts of Waiting will help prepare us for Christmas morning, but also aid us in learning to wait better in all areas of our lives. We want our times of waiting to be less of a burden and more of an opportunity for the work of God.

What do we mean by an Act of Waiting?

What do we do while we wait? The Acts of Waiting are the things we do or the behaviors we have *during* a point when we are waiting. Instead of grumbling or trying to distract ourselves, we practice intentional actions during times of waiting that open us to the work of God.

What are the Acts of Waiting?

We are focusing on 4 different Acts of Waiting (*Presence, Self-Denial, Obedience and Contemplation*) throughout this season. Each week the devotional will then have 5 reflections upon one of these Acts of Waiting. After reading each day, we encourage you to turn back to this page and chose an Act of Waiting to practice

Examples of Acts of Waiting

Presence

Take the time to notice someone you meet today and say something kind to them.

Put away all electronic devices as you share a meal with someone and focus on the time and meal you are sharing together.

Turn off the radio on your commute today and ask God to show you what He has for you during this time.

Spend five minutes just listening to a spouse, a child or a friend share about their day and pay attention to their tone and demeanor as you listen.

Stand still for a few minutes in your home or a public place and take in what you see and hear.

Self-Denial

Get up 15 minutes early to spend time in prayer before the day begins.

Let another shopper in front of you in the check out line.

Forgo a trip to your favorite coffee shop and donate the money you save to a charity.

Pray for someone you want to curse.

Turn the other cheek in an argument you are having for the sake of the other person.

Obedience

The Bible is filled with many commandments for us to practice. This is not an exhaustive list, just commands from Romans 12:9-21:

- Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.
- Love one another with brotherly affection.
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope
- Be patient in tribulation
- Be constant in prayer.
- Contribute to the needs of the saints
- Seek to show hospitality.
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice
- Weep with those who weep.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.
- Never be wise in your own sight.
- Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.
- If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

- Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

You might also consider:

Matthew 5-7

Ephesians 4:25-32

Philippians 2:1-4

Philippians 4:4-9

Colossians 3:12-17

Contemplation

Spend 10 minutes talking with another about the birth of Christ and the impact that it has on your life.

Take 10 moments today and look for what God is doing in that moment. Set alarms if you need a reminder.

Spend a few minutes pondering a special object and share whatever thoughts and feelings it raises in you with God.

Spend five minutes in silence just listening for God without asking any questions or making any petitions.

Take a single verse out of the Bible and meditate on it. Reading it slowly over and over again. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

Practicing Presence

Did you know that multitasking is impossible? Humans cannot adequately focus on more than one thing at a time. While we are capable of handling meaningful tasks in rapid succession, or at best handle an automatic task at the same time we are doing something that isn't automatic, such as chopping carrots while helping a child with math homework, we just cannot focus on two things at once. Yet, our culture keeps pushing for increased productivity, inundating us with e-mails, text messages and constant communication, demanding our time and attention at all hours of the day and night. We have become so accustomed to the constant intrusions that we almost don't notice them anymore. We rapidly shift our attention from our phone to the conversation we are having, to the e-mail from work, to the PTA flyer, to making dinner. We tell ourselves that we are "multitasking". All of this has become so second nature that it has become difficult to do "single-tasking" or have a singular focus. This is why if we wish to be present, we must practice at it.

To practice being present, we must first accept our limitations. Just as we cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24), we cannot focus on two things at the same time. When we are on e-mail, thinking about what we have to do at work the next day, or how we will get all the Christmas shopping done, we are not truly present in the moment. Instead, we are practicing what we need to do, rather than practicing being present. In this way, we miss what is going on right in front of us.

To be present, we must learn to focus on the here and now. This can be especially difficult during the season of Advent. How many times does it feel like you blink on Dec. 1st, and open your eyes and it is Dec. 23rd? This is because we can become so focused on the destination of this season, Dec. 25th, that we miss what God intends for us *during* this season.

During this Advent, let us practice being present. Advent is meant to be a time of expectant waiting. It is designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ. But most of us are so busy anticipating the holiday that we miss out on the waiting and personal preparation God has for us. We must learn to embrace the waiting rather than avoid it for it is in the waiting that God can nudge us and bring about change within us.

To be present in the waiting we must let the worry for the future, and the regrets of the past fade away. We must focus on what we are doing in the moment. Are we waiting in line at the checkout counter; Who has God placed around us that we are to be present to? Are we having dinner with our family; How is God shaping our family through those interactions? Are we stuck in traffic? Rather than running away from the waiting by rehearsing in our minds all of the things we have to do over the next 2 days, or turning on the radio to catch up on the news of the day, we can ask God what He has for us in that moment.

God wants to prepare us to receive His son during this Advent season. Will we be present in the moment and allow God to use this season of waiting to bring about the change He has for us, or will we fill the waiting with the hurried frenzy of rehearsing for the future, or the unfulfilling regrets of the past and allow ourselves to avoid what God has for us in this season?

***Practice 1 Act of Presence**

Mary: Presence

My son stepped up to the mic in his first grade play. I had my phone up, camera on. I moved closer and knelt down. Clicking the button, I watched my son through the tiny screen of my iPhone 6. As I headed back to my seat, I saw another parent videoing her child, but with her iPhone focused on the big screen where the play was being projected. That moment struck me. She was watching her daughter perform through the screen on her phone focused on another screen. I looked back at the stage. Were we so busy trying to capture the moment for the future that we weren't present in the moment itself.

Temptation to miss the present moment assails us from every side. We might call it making memories or multitasking or just doing important work, but how many times are we pulled from being fully present in the moment? How often do we miss something of what is happening right in front of us?

Mary didn't. Many times in her life Mary was very present, very focused upon what was happening in the moment. Consider when the shepherds came and told her about the angels. She "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). When Simeon spoke blessing over Jesus, Mary "marveled" (Luke 2:33), which means to wonder in amazement. After finding Jesus in the temple when he was twelve, Mary again "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51). In each case, whatever distractions might have sidetracked her, whatever multitasking or important work she might have needed to do, she chose instead to be present in the moment.

Each account also has an element of waiting. Mary waits in a cave instead of an inn, pondering how long they will have to be there or when their baby will get an actual crib. Mary waits to see how Jesus will become all the angel and Simeon foretold of him. As they journey home from the temple, Mary waits to see how things will turn out between her husband and her son after the temple encounter.

Mary has to wait a lot, but her waiting is not lost time. As she waited for a room at an inn or waited to discover in what ways Jesus would become all the angel and Simeon said of him, rather than responding in anger because she had no control, frustration because it wasn't happening fast enough or just getting distracted by things that did not really matter, she chose to practice being present to the moment even as she waited. All of us have times of waiting, Mary shows us a way to respond *during* these times: be present to our moments.

As Darth Vader famously said before he died: "I need to look at you with my own eyes." Maybe it's time to put down our phones and cameras, and do the same.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Presence**

Joseph: Presence

We do not know much about Joseph. He has the incredible role of raising the Son of God, but we have no recorded words from him in the Scripture, and his story is basically done after the first few chapters of the gospels. Yet, this meager amount of information is presented in such a way that we still learn important aspects of this man's character. Joseph, like most of us had times of waiting in his life. He takes Mary as his wife, but has to wait to "know" her (Matthew 1:25). He takes his family to Egypt in order to escape Herod and has to wait an undisclosed period of time before he can then take them home (Matthew 2:13). Like Mary, he has to wait to see how God will fulfill the many promises concerning Jesus.

In a way, the little information we have concerning Joseph suggests that his life could be characterized by waiting. During all of this waiting, one particular account in the temple shows us part of the way Joseph waited. He and his wife had taken their new baby to be presented to the Lord. They encounter an older man named Simeon who immediately takes the child into his arms and pronounces a blessing. Luke records that Joseph "marveled" about what was said about his son (Luke 2:33).

At first that may not seem like much, but the reaction is not necessarily what a typically carpenter in Joseph's place might have done. Consider the following:

- Joseph already has lots of unanswered questions concerning his son
- Joseph likely lost business because he chose not to put Mary away as would have been expected of him
- Joseph now takes more time away from work to travel to Jerusalem, bring the child to the busy temple, which would

have been much different and probably overwhelming compared to his little town

- Joseph watches as an old man, not the person they traveled here to see, but just a random old man in the temple lifts his son up disrupting what Joseph was there to do
- Joseph then listens to the lofty, scholarly words of this old man, some of which likely made little sense to the carpenter Joseph

Put all that together. I can imagine myself responding in frustration or impatience. I can imagine rolling my eyes and just waiting for the old man to finish up so we could be on our way. I might even feel a little angry considering everything I had given up and suddenly this old man just steps into the picture.

None of that characterized Joseph's response. He "marveled" at the words. The word means to wonder or be amazed. This is a "wow" moment. Why this response and not one of the others? With everything Joseph was waiting for, everything he had sacrificed, why this response? Joseph was present in the moment. He was present enough to know there was something special about this old man, present enough to hear his words and recognize in them something just as special as the old man who said them. He was present enough in the moment to realize that this moment was more important than all the questions Joseph had.

One way we can go through our times of waiting is being present to the moments, people and work of God taking place all around us and in us.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Presence**

Simeon: Presence

In 1958, C.S. Lewis wrote a letter to an American lady: "To tell a story which puts the contrast between *our* feast of the Nativity and all this ghastly 'Xmas' racket at its lowest. My brother heard a woman on a bus say, as the bus passed a church with a Crib outside it, 'Oh Lor! They bring religion into everything. Look – they're dragging it *even* into Christmas now!'" In another letter, he wrote: "I feel exactly as you do about the horrid commercial racket they have made out of Christmas. I send no cards and give no presents except to children."

Lewis pulls no punches of how he felt about the "racket" that surrounded him during Christmas. What would he think about our culture now! All the materialism bombarding us, all the engagements and responsibilities burying us and all the chaos surging through this season like a flood overwhelm our senses and our time. How do we not get lost in all of it?

The first century had its own racket. Various religious leaders vied for power. The Romans sought political-military domination. The everyday cries of merchants and farmers in the towns and fields filled the air. In the midst of this racket, waited an old man for the consolation of Israel. But what stands out is that Simeon did not get lost in the racket because Simeon did not wait passively. Instead of getting overwhelming by all of it, he made himself present to the most important part of it. Being a devout and righteous man who knew the Scriptures, he attuned himself to what the Scripture declared and how the Spirit led.

Luke tells us that the Spirit gave Simeon a promise: "that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). The Spirit also guided him to the Temple to find Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. Instead of losing himself in the racket, Simeon remained present to Scripture and the Spirit. Right there in the middle of the Temple's

racket, he lifted the baby and blessed him. He held the Messiah for all to see.

Did anyone hear? Did anyone see? Was anyone present enough to even know the Messiah was present with them? Simeon slowed down. Simeon remembered. Simeon took the time to listen. He made himself present amidst all the racket, and his reward was to behold the face of the Messiah.

In the midst of all of our cultural racket, are we present to the Scripture and the Spirit like Simeon? Or like the crowds are we lost in the racket and missing presence of God with us?

-Jeremy Gregory

***Practice 1 Act of Presence**

Magi: Presence

Every time we come home — every single time — our white lab greets us as if she had not seen us in six months. Energy sizzles off of her with every part of her body vibrating. It takes all her focus to keep from mauling us in love. In her utter joy she is completely unaware of everything else around her. Like a club, her tail smashes any item unlucky enough to rest about two feet off the ground from figurines to lamps (sometimes even a kneecap here or there). Her concentration is complete. Nothing else matters, but making her deep and abiding affection known.

These enthusiastic greetings can be heart warming, but they can also be quite irritating. The problem with our lab rests in the fact that she has no capacity to read the room. My iPhone notices the changes in lighting within a room, and it adjusts the screen accordingly. It is very present to what is happening. My dog is not. If you come home sad, her tail wags back and forth at the speed of a fan on high, and her eyes display nothing but utter joy. Guess what? If you come home happy, angry or depressed, it is the same reaction. She does not adjust. She does not read the room. She is not present to what is around her, but is lost in herself.

I know at times I have this same problem. I can completely miss what is happening around me, miss the cues or even the larger actions taking place because I get lost in myself. This can be especially true in my times of waiting. I can remember one time picking my daughter up from school when she came out really late. As I sat waiting for her, looking for her, I felt myself getting frustrated. I had things to do, and I had been in my car for too long that day. The longer it took, the more focused I became, so focused and so annoyed by it all that two things happened.

First, I actually missed her approaching the car. I was so wrapped up in her not being there, I stopped scanning the area. I had a laser focus on

the one door she always came out of. Second, when she did arrive, I missed every cue that something hard had happened that had made her late. Instead, I just rudely told her how irked I was that she was so late and did not even have the decency to text me and let me know. Like my dog, and unlike my iPhone, I was not present to that moment and I missed what was really happening.

Why do I share all of this? When we meet the Magi, we know they made a long journey from the east, but I am intrigued by their first words to Herod about seeing “his star” rise (Matthew 2:2). We do not know much about these guys, but a good conjecture is that they have a connection to Daniel who became head of the wisemen in Babylon (Daniel 2:48). It is possible that this group of wisemen had been looking for the coming of Jesus for more than five centuries. What kind of emotion does that disappointment bring up when generation after generation dies without seeing the star? And honestly, have you ever looked up at a starry sky when you were not in a crowded city? How would one even notice “his star” rising in the sky?

I am impressed by the wisemen because they were so present in the moment. No amount of disappointment, no amount of time and no amount of stars distracted them from the moment. Seeing that star meant too much to them. No matter how long they waited, they remained present because the star held such amazing value as it led to the king.

Like the wisemen, there are things that mean a lot to me, but especially when I wait, I can easily lose sight of what is happening around me. I can even end up losing sight of that which I am waiting for. When I focus on being present in the moment, I can respond in better ways to those around me and not be so lost in my own world that I miss what God is doing.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Presence**

Practicing Self-Denial

How many products today promote themselves by promoting the buyer? To put this differently, how many times do we hear something along the lines of “you deserve” this or that? A primary psychological way of selling products is to play upon our sense of entitlement. It is no longer about how good (or bad) a product is. Rather, the value of the product is assumed and the selling point becomes how much I *deserve* to benefit from this product.

The sense of entitlement does not stop with commercials. I recently read a comment by a small business owner concerning how much money to pay an employee. He said when he speaks to younger people applying for a job, they will tell him how much they want to make. When he asks *why* they should make that much money, the answer is that this amount would allow them to be comfortable because they have housing and car payments, cell phone payment, school debts, etc. The startling thing is that at no point do they speak about the value of their skills that would justify such an amount. Rather, they have decided what they deserve based upon what they have already committed themselves to.

One look at our society today could easily leave someone with the impression that we deny ourselves nothing. In fact, the entire concept of self-denial is anathema to an entitlement culture where we deserve this or that. Part of our struggle with waiting is a feeling that we deserve better. We deserve to be treated better, to have the answers we want and to not wait in long lines. Interestingly, as much as we as a culture rail against self-denial, as parents we want our kids to practice being able to say no to themselves. Even modern psychology boasts of the benefits of self-denial: “scarcity can lead people to focus on

enjoying an experience more deeply (i.e., savoring), which increases happiness.”¹

At the very heart of the message of Jesus Christ is a call to self-denial: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Instead of being a negative thing, learning to say “no” to self and reject an entitlement mentality is the pathway to following Jesus as a disciple and can bring about greater, not lesser, satisfaction in life. This is a primary key to learning how to wait well.

In our times of waiting, when our sense of entitlement or self-importance causes us to get angry or impatient, it is the practice of denying oneself that offers us a better way of waiting. Throughout the Biblical record many people had to wait. Even Jesus had to wait. One of his hardest moments of waiting came in the garden as the cross loomed in his future. Though he actually did deserve a better fate, he went through this period of waiting by practicing self-denial: “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). May we all learn and practice saying, “not my will, but yours” as we go through our times of waiting.

***Practice 1 Act of Self-Denial**

¹ Quoidbach, J., & Dunn, E. W. (2013). *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4, 563-568.

Mary: Self-Denial

American society is averse to many things. Two of these things are waiting and self-denial. Most of our technological advances are meant to make us more efficient so we don't have to wait. This allows us to get what *we want*, or where *we want* to be, much more quickly. Notice the emphasis. Much of our difficulty with waiting stems from the fact that we want to be in control at all times, but this is not what God wants. He wants us to be able to deny ourselves for His sake. Submitting to God is our greatest act of self-denial and one act to help us through times of waiting.

Mary submits to God's plan told her by the angel, but throughout her life, during times of waiting, she continued to practice self-denial. After giving birth in a stable instead of a home, Joseph received a dream telling them they must flee to Egypt. Instead of returning home and beginning her new life as a mother, Mary would have to wait to resume a normal life. During this period of waiting, she denied her own dreams and hopes for her life, even without knowing when her fragile family's time of wandering would end. Again, at the wedding in Cana, when her friends had run out of wine, she asks Jesus for help, but he essentially says "No" (John 2:4). She does not argue or ask someone else for help, but instead waits and in her waiting she denies her own plans and trusts in Jesus. In these situations and others, Mary's focus was not on her circumstances, but on her Lord. It is not that she was unaware of the circumstance she was in, but through the uncertainty and the waiting, her primary focus was on God. This allowed her to practice self-denial pursuing not *her own* plans, but *His*.

Our times of waiting may be big like Mary not being able to return home or smaller like the wedding at Cana. We could be inconvenienced by holiday traffic or be in the midst of health

struggles wondering if God will heal us. We could be suffering severe relationship discord or be searching for direction from God that feels like it will never come. In these times of waiting, we can choose to focus on God as Mary did, saying: "not my will, but yours."

In times of waiting, it is easy to focus on our own desires, become impatient, or even be driven to despair. When we practice self-denial by focusing on Him instead of our circumstances, we may find that by saying to God "What is *Your* will for me right now?" time stuck in traffic turns into a wonderful conversation with a family member, a fractured relationship is used to help us become a better spouse, parent, or child, or our frustration in waiting for direction from God becomes awareness that He is moving in many small ways and allowing us to be a part of what He is doing every day, of every week, of every year.

-Erin Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Self-Denial**

Joseph: Self-Denial

As Joseph anxiously waited to be married to Mary, his life and future plans were suddenly turned upside down! First, he found out his fiancé was pregnant even though he had not been with her! Next, with a forgiving heart, he began making plans to take Mary away to safety and protect her from being stoned. Soon afterwards, an angel appeared to him and proclaimed that the child in Mary's womb was from the Holy Spirit and was the Son of God! That is a lot to take in! Even for a man who was "just" and compassionate, that is a lot to process. What makes it even harder is how much of what Joseph has to go through is filled with waiting.

- He must wait to "know" his wife
- He must wait to meet his son
- He must wait to see how his life will turn out after not following the socially expected action of publicly putting Mary away (possibly even having her stoned)

Not only has Joseph's life been thrown into chaos, but he has long periods of time to wait before even seeing how the chaos will be resolved. So what does he do during his waiting?

Joseph responds by putting his own future on hold. He practices self-denial during his waiting. Instead of doing what is best for him personally, he denies his own future and walks in the will of God. He denies his own future and shows compassion to Mary. He denies his own rights as a husband and remains celibate with his wife until after Jesus is born. As Joseph waited for his new life to unfold, it was all about God's will and other people. It was about denying himself and trusting God in the waiting.

What does it look like to deny yourself and live for Christ? What does it look like to live Kingdom first? While we wait for Jesus to return, we also go through many periods of waiting. With each time of waiting,

we have opportunities to practice self-denial. We can deny our own desires and chose instead to care for others and to follow Jesus. When we are treated unfairly and have to wait to see how things will turn out, we can focus on not being judgmental and not losing ourselves in our anger, but denying ourselves and trusting God. When we are waiting in traffic, instead of giving into our anxiety or frustration and complaining or cursing others around us, we can deny ourselves and focus on blessing others and praying for others.

It is not easy, but self-denial is rarely easy even when we are not dealing with periods of waiting. Yet, Jesus called us to deny ourselves because it is a primary means of being conformed into the image of Christ. It is how we are like our Savior who denied himself, and it is how we can truly draw close to our Him and bring His light into the world.

-Deacon Sandra Rios-Doria

***Practice 1 Act of Self-Denial**

Simeon: Self-Denial

When I was a young girl in junior high, I went with a friend to a Missionary presentation in the basement of the local Baptist church. This was back in the days of black and white slides, and as I sat watching images on the screen I heard the missionary's heart for God. I knew that one day, I wanted to be a part of sharing God's love with the world. But life happened! There was high school, my parent's divorce, college and then marriage followed by four kids. The dream faded, but didn't disappear. Occasionally a moment would rise up at church, a commercial on T.V. to sponsor a child or I would volunteer with a local ministry and I could feel my spirit drawn back to missions. I had a wise mentor who told me, right now your mission field may be these four children and their friends, but one day God will give you the dream of your heart. But I had to wait, deny myself the pursuit of this dream for years. Forgetting about it most of the time. Have you ever had a dream that you felt God was asking you to wait on in self-denial while you were obedient to the present moments?

Simeon was waiting on the 'consolation of Israel' and his act of self-denial was actually postponing his own return to glory! Simeon had held fast to the knowledge that one day he would see Christ, the Messiah, before he died and he waited on that day. He lived in Jerusalem and walked with the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:25-27). Simeon's act of self-denial brought him very close to God. The Holy Spirit promised Simeon that he would 'not see death' until he had witnessed the presence of Christ. Simeon must have been elderly and longing for death and completion of his godly life, but he was given this beautiful opportunity to see Christ before he departed this earth. His self-denial was patient and holy, infused with God's love and tenderness as he waited for this prophecy to unfold. How do you allow self-denial to affect your spirit as you wait on your dreams?

As I walked through life, raising four kids to adulthood with my husband, attending church, working in the world, God was preparing

me to serve Him in missions. And I had no idea it was happening! But when I 'won' a mission trip at a church function it was my moment of fulfillment of a promise God put in my heart years before. It was an unfolding of a dream into ministry and missions. God prepared Simeon in his self-denial to prophecy over the Christ child and provide Mary insight to the future (Luke 2:34). His mission was complete as he held Jesus in his arms, speaking blessing over Him and His family. The reward of his self-denial was to 'depart in peace' and he saw 'salvation' gazing up at him in the eyes of the holy child (Luke 2:29).

-Deacon Lauri Diamond

***Practice 1 Act of Self-Denial**

Magi: Self-Denial

"It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me." – Batman

Batman has intrigued people since he first flew across the pages of *Detectives Comics #27* in 1939. He possesses no superpowers. He operates under the cover of darkness blending in to the night with a black suit with a bat-wing cape inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci's sketch of an ornithopter flying device. Where superman stands as the ultimate symbol of good, Batman fights for good, but drifts between light and dark.

The quote above highlights a key part of the mystery and power of Batman. Almost everyone around him has no idea who he really is. However, the audience knows. We know that he is a superhero, but also a billionaire. We know he stalks and defeats hardened criminals by night while running a company by day. He is complex, but no matter who he really is, his actions are what defines him. The love and intrigue so for this hero is not because he is Bruce Wayne or Batman. It is because of what he does.

The same could be said of the Magi introduced in the gospel of Matthew. Honestly, we know very little about them. They have a secret identity that remains secret to this day. Some call them magi, some call them wiseman and some call them kings. Throughout the history of the church one can find different leaders at different points labeling them as all three of these. We do not know what they are underneath. We only know their actions.

Some details in the text suggest a few intriguing ideas about these men. First, when they come asking about the one born king of the Jews, Herod takes notice. He invites them into his

presence. Herod was crazy and paranoid, but he did not entertain every single person talking about another king. Something about these guys concerned him. Second, they take a long journey bringing very expensive gifts to offer to this one born king of Jews. These two details strongly suggest they were prominent people of means. And whether they were magi, wisemen or kings, they were very important people used to being honored for who they were.

Batman also said "I'm whatever Gotham needs me to be." Though he is rich and powerful and though he is a highly trained fighter with ridiculously cool gadgets, Batman practices self-denial by using what he has for the sake of others. He could claim all he has for himself, but instead of taking glory, he hides his identity; he uses his resources and skills not to build himself up, but to care for others. That is the real heart of self-denial. It is not meaningless self-flagellation. It is laying down what is rightfully mine for the sake of others.

The Magi do precisely that. They begin a journey. We do not know how long it took them, but the entire time they traveled and waited to finally come into the presence of the one born king of Jews, they practiced self-denial. They carried with them gifts that rightfully belonged to them, but knew during the period of waiting, they had already given them up for the sake of another. Instead of a continuous stream of "are we there yet?" these men focused on denying themselves by making this long trip, kneeling before another and giving up expensive gifts that were by rights theirs.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Self-Denial**

Practicing Obedience

The term “obedience” might most easily call to mind a picture of a dog and its master, or perhaps a parent and a child. In these examples, perfect obedience is to be praised. A person with exceptionally well-behaved children or a dog that follows complex commands is credited with having trained either their children or their animal well. Note that in both of these cases, the adult is considered the master, or the one to be obeyed. In contrast, it is relatively rare that we praise an adult for their obedience to another.

In our culture, submission to another’s authority is not something to strive for. Yes, we have laws that as good citizens we obey. But this is not considered to be obedience. Obedience is more all encompassing than just not breaking the law. It is a consistent daily following of an authority outside oneself. In our world when we see examples of one adult being obedient to another it is most often forced submission due to power imbalance. Rightfully, our sense of good is appalled by this corruption of power and we seek to rid the world of these injustices. But obedience to God is not one of forced submission. While there is a definite power imbalance between us and God, the obedience He asks of us is requested, not demanded or forced. Culturally, we do not have a good parallel for what it means to be obedient to God and because of this it is difficult to learn perfect obedience.

At the heart of obedience is trust. While outward actions of obedience involve relinquishing our own plans and desires for the plans and desires of another in order for this letting go to succeed in the long term, trust must be present. Just as when training, it is easy for a dog to “wait” when there are no distractions, it is easy for us to obey when life is generally going as we would have planned it. But when a squirrel runs by, a dog who is in training will have a stronger desire to chase than to obey. In order for the dog to obey in the face of temptation, it must trust it’s master. So it is with us.

When the “squirrel’s of life” run by us, what is our strongest desire? Is our first inclination to seek after God, or is it to try to take control? When we lose our job, a loved one gets sick, or a relationship becomes difficult, where do we turn first? We naturally turn to the one that we trust the most. Do we trust in His plans for our lives, or our own? When we are wronged and God says “turn the other cheek,” do we do so, or do we retaliate? It is only by fully trusting the One who created us that we can truly wholeheartedly obey.

So how do we learn to trust and obey? We must practice. Just as training of children or animals takes consistency, so does our training. When we practice obedience in the small areas and find God to be faithful, it gives us the courage to trust Him in with things of consequence. When we give to the poor and find that our needs are still met, we find it easier to trust and obey Him during a job loss. When we forgive a small injustice and find that we are not truly harmed, we have the courage to obey and turn the other cheek in larger injustices. However, if we take control every time things get shaky, we will have difficulties learning to obey.

This Advent, let us practice obedience in the small things. Give God an offering of prayer at the beginning of the day. Share what you have with someone in need. Practice following Him, and allow your trust to increase so that your desire to follow Him might increase as well.

***Practice 1 Act of Obedience**

Mary: Obedience

Imagine being a fourteen-year-old girl and finding out you are pregnant! After the initial shock, there would be so many questions. How can this happen to me? How will my parents react? What about my friends? What about my future plans?

Mary's experience was very similar to this. She was a young girl when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced that she would become pregnant with the Son of God! We can only imagine her shock, not only at becoming pregnant, but becoming pregnant while she was a virgin! She must have had some of the same questions as above. For Mary, perhaps the most difficult question would deal with her fiancé Joseph. What would he do when he found out? Would he still want to marry her? How would this change course of her life? It would be years before she knew how this would impact her. Mary had no choice, but to wait; however, Mary would wait well. She would practice obedience as she waited for her life to unfold.

Not knowing how any of this would work out, and knowing that in her culture they stoned unwed mothers, Mary still responded in obedience to the angel: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

While Mary waited for the birth of Jesus, she remembered the words of the angel that her relative was also pregnant and traveled eighty miles to see her. This visit allowed for them to spend time together, and they both shared their good news! Elizabeth, in her old age, was also pregnant and awaiting the birth of her son, who would pave the way for Jesus. Out of this visit, Mary sings a song that continues to reflect her obedience: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Luke 1:46). We see that months after the

announcement, Mary still fully accepts God's will and joyfully practices obedience in her waiting.

This continued through her life so that thirty years later, we find Mary in the upper room waiting for the Holy Spirit. Why was she there? Jesus told them to go and wait. Even after decades of multiple times of eating in her life, Mary continued to practice obedience as she waited.

Let us follow her example of practicing obedience as we wait in our lives.

-Deacon Sandra Rios-Doria

***Practice 1 Act of Obedience**

Joseph: Obedience

Perhaps the oldest advice on record about how to fall asleep is counting sheep. Many people struggle to shut down their brain and actually enter into a peaceful rest. According to science today, if that is a problem for you, counting sheep is probably not your answer.

It is believed, at least anecdotally, that the idea of counting sheep to fall asleep originated with early sheep herders who could not get to sleep at night without actually counting their sheep and making sure none had wandered off. Here is the problem: counting sheep is an active mental process that uses parts of the brain associated with processing information. That means instead of helping us fall asleep, it might actually work against us in our efforts to doze off.

Not all is lost though. The concept of shifting the mind away from actively trying to fall asleep (which most realize is self-defeating) to something else so that we can fall asleep has merit. One study in 2001 demonstrated that people had better chances of falling asleep if they imagined something that brought them peace. Other methods include a warm bath or relaxation exercises. The point is this: focusing on falling asleep makes it hard to turn off our brain, but if we can divert our focus to other things, it can help turn off our brain so that we fall asleep.

Joseph had a lot to focus on and few answers. Joseph was in a long period of waiting. He had to wait to be with his wife. He had to wait go back to his home. He had to wait to see how his livelihood would fare following his decision not to publicly put away his wife after she became pregnant outside their engagement. In all of this, Joseph could have focused on the waiting. He could have spent his mental energy thinking about

everything he could not do or have. In that case, much like trying to fall asleep by focusing on falling asleep, he would likely have just gotten frustrated, angry or depressed.

How do we make it through our periods of waiting when we cannot make them shorter, and we do not know the answers at the end? Whether we are waiting on test results, word on a promotion, the outcome of a trial or a house to sell, if we spend our energy concentrating on what we are waiting on, it will drive us crazy. What did Joseph do?

He focused on obeying. Throughout his story, he continues over and over again not to get lost in what he is waiting for, but to put his attention on what he can control: listening to God and doing what he is told. He takes Mary as his wife, but does not "know" her (Matthew 1:24-25). He calls his son Jesus instead of a family name (Matthew 1:21, 25). He takes his son to be presented at the temple at the time for purification (Luke 2:22). He takes his family to Egypt instead of home (Luke 2:21). One act of obedience after another during this period of waiting.

Like thinking of a relaxing place or taking a warm bath to help our minds shut down so we can sleep, Joseph put his mind on doing something he could do. He focused on obeying God, instead of things he could not control, making the period of waiting shorter. Joseph did not get lost in the waiting. We have the same opportunity to listen to God's Word and God's Spirit and practice obedience during our times of waiting.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Obedience**

Simeon: Obedience

I've never been much of a long distance runner. I admire people who can pound the pavement for hours on end, but rarely in my life have I been one of them. I recently read an article about some of the cognitive strategies runners use to travel these long distance over several hours. What I found most interesting was some of the differences between beginning and more seasoned runners.

According to the article, beginning runners are more likely to use strategies such as focusing on breathing or listening to music. When a person decides to go long distance like this, they focus on a way to keep the mind occupied in order to travel for such long periods of time. Dr. Noel Brick, one of the world's leading experts on this topic, said these kinds of practices are mostly about distraction. In other words, they do not necessarily help make the runner any better. Instead they allow the runner to travel a longer distance by diverting the mind from the monotony of the run. This is exactly what I did! There are, however, two possible drawback to these strategies. First, you may not actually get distracted by the music, so the tactic fails. Secondly, you may get distracted from the wrong thing: namely your pace. The music may push you to run harder too quickly and run out of energy faster.

Interestingly, more seasoned runners typically have different cognitive strategies and may not even listen to music. These tactics include things like paying attention to breathing not as a distraction, but as a means of determining if their pace is correct. They might use positive self talk, which has been shown to improve motivation and focus, ultimately improving endurance and reduce the perception of effort. The one I found most interesting was called "chunking," where runners mentally break the run into smaller chunks. What all these

share in common is that they are not distractions meant to simply take one's mind off of the running, but rather to improve the running, to make it better. Long distance running is hard, but these strategies help runners *run further*.

When we meet Simeon, we discover an older man running a faith marathon. He is "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). That is a long wait that had been happening for generations. He was also waiting to see the Lord's Christ since the Holy Spirit revealed to him: "he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). This is long distance waiting. This is a years and decades kind of waiting. How do we get through this kind of waiting?

Distraction won't do it. Sure, we could drown ourselves in alcohol or binge watch every season of Friends on Netflix, but that does not help us wait better for what the Lord is doing. Rather, for a while, it takes our mind off of what we don't have. This is like listening to music when running long distance.

Simeon does something different. "And he came in the Spirit into the temple" (Luke 2:27). Don't let that sneak by you. When he woke up, it was another day of waiting just like the day before and the day before that and the weeks and years before that, but Simeon's strategy to wait well was not a to become distracted to take his mind off it. Rather, he obeyed. He may not even have planned to go to the temple on that morning, but he was practiced in obeying God and when the Holy Spirit led him, he was ready.

We often cannot force an end to our marathon times of waiting, but we can focus on obeying God while we are in them.

-Fr. Jason Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Obedience**

Magi: Obedience

Obedience is difficult. But certain things make obedience even more difficult. For example, even a person who likes to obey the speed limit may find his foot feeling heavy if he is running late for a job interview. A child who wants to please her parents may still eat an extra piece of candy if her Christmas stocking, which is filled with delicious sugary treats, is left in his room.

The ease with which we obey is largely dependent upon our circumstances. For example, it is much easier to obey someone who has authority over us. Many of us do not take great issue with following directives from our job supervisors, but would never consider following directives from our children. Similarly, many of us can obey for a short period of time if we can quickly see benefits from our behavior. It is also easier to obey if we understand the logic of it. "Don't run out into the street because you might get hit by a car" carries much more truth on a 4-lane highway than in a cul-de-sac. What we see in the Magi's act of obedience shows an attitude of obedience that defies circumstance.

They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. The problem is they have witnessed nothing out of the ordinary that would indicate Herod is a danger to them. Everything points the opposite direction. Remember that earlier in this chapter, Herod had requested that the Magi search for the child and then report back so that *he too could go worship the baby*. Herod was the king, ruling over the land that the Magi were travelling in. The crazy thing is that instead of the Magi obeying the natural authority of the land that they had no reason to doubt, they listened instead to a dream: "they departed to their own country by another way" (Matthew 2:12).

Their obedience to the dream defied logic. The Magi had come to worship the baby. Logically Herod would want to do the same, and even states as much. Herod treated the Magi well when they arrived.

There was simply no rational reason that the Magi shouldn't do as Herod requested. Yet, they chose to obey the dream.

Their obedience not only defied logic, but also came with no strings attached. They did not have the luxury of obeying and then seeing the fruit of that obedience right away to encourage them. In fact, we don't know if they *ever* found out what happened or why they were told to go home a different way. The Magi depart to their own country and wait, not knowing if the baby they came to worship would become a great king or if he would follow in his father's footsteps as a carpenter. They didn't know if Herod would pursue them once he found out about their betrayal, or if their actions would bring war on their country. But we do know that they never wavered in their obedience, even in the waiting, because Matthew tells us: "Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious" (Matthew 2:16).

The Magi obeyed in a circumstance which tests obedience in many ways. Just as with the Magi, waiting tests our obedience. It becomes easy to second-guess our actions, especially if we are given the opportunity to change our minds. As we wait for the birth of our Savior this Advent, will we practice obedience that defies logic? Will we be willing to obey God even when His directives are at odds with what the world would have us do?

-Erin Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Obedience**

Practicing Contemplation

According to the dictionary, contemplation is the “action of looking thoughtfully at something for a long time,” or “deep reflective thought” or “religious meditation.” Basically, contemplation is thinking really hard about something.

Yet, in the history of Christianity, contemplation was more than just pondering something deeply, though it was that as well. Contemplation was about prayer, about connecting to God at a heart level. It was about relationship with God.'

St. Gregory in the 6th century said it this way: “Resting quietly in the presence of God”. St John of the Cross wrote: “For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love.”

Thomas Merton wrote: “We must approach our meditation realizing that 'grace,' 'mercy,' and 'faith' are not permanent inalienable possessions which we gain by our efforts and retain as though by right, provided that we behave ourselves. They are **CONSTANTLY RENEWED GIFTS**. The life of grace in our hearts is renewed from moment to moment, directly and personally by God in his love for us.”

Contemplation involves looking deeply into the face of Christ, mediating upon his love and grace. But at its heart, contemplation is prayer that responds to the beauty of God and opens the mind and heart to the work of God. Contemplation reminds us that we cannot earn anything from God, we can only receive what God already offers us in Christ. Contemplation seeks God not through a list of moral deeds, but as a child falling into the arms of a parent. Contemplation does not so much seek for God to give something to us or fix something in our lives as much as it is a time to reflect upon who God is, being open to what God desires to do. We do not come with

petitions in contemplation, but with vulnerable hearts offering all we are to the great lover of our souls.

Thomas Merton also wrote this concerning contemplation: "Prayer does not blind us to the world, but it transforms our vision of the world, and makes us see it, all men, and all the history of mankind, in the light of God. To pray 'in spirit and in truth' enables us to enter into contact with that infinite love, that inscrutable freedom which is at work behind the complexities and the intricacies of human existence. This does not mean fabricating for ourselves pious rationalizations to explain everything that happens. It involves no surreptitious manipulation of the hard truths of life."

In the practice of contemplation we surrender to God as we deeply ponder the holiness and power and love of our Father. We do not come in order to make believe that everything is ok. We come to connect to God that He might help us to see that in Him there is nothing that cannot be ok.

In our times of waiting, we can practice contemplation. We can focus on God. We can open our hearts to God expressing our feelings, and resting in God.

***Practice 1 Act of Contemplation**

Mary: Contemplation

Conception, pregnancy and birth are part of being made in the image of God. We are life producers and bearers. Life is a miracle. So many details have to align exactly for conception to occur. From the time of that first suspicion to the hospital delivery room, I contemplated, 'why now', 'why me', 'what's the name', 'boy or girl'...the list goes on! Sometimes I forgot the miracle of life in the busy mess of living. But in the stillness of the night, when I could feel that flutter or kick, the reality of carrying a life was overwhelming. That God would choose this way of making His image was beyond me. And that my husband and I got to be a part was a miracle.

As amazing and as beautiful as normal human conception is, there is not a lot of mystery surrounding getting pregnant. We know how this happens. Mary's divine conception was different. God allowed great mystery as the quiet and gentle power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed this young, virgin girl to conceive a baby (Lk 1:35). The Holy Trinity was at work in her physical being in a way no other person in the history of the world had experienced.

This was not lost on Mary. Leading up to her son's birth and following his birth as she waited to see how all the angel said would come true, Mary contemplated. We see her thinking deeply about what was said to her by the angel, by the shepherds, by the old man Simeon and even by the words of the young Jesus himself (Lk 1:46-55; 2:19, 33, 51). Instead of complaining because she did not have answers or being impatient to see how God would accomplish all He told her, Mary carefully listened and then spent part of the time she had to wait, practicing contemplation on the amazing work God was doing.

It is easy for us to rush through the Advent season, but what if we slowed down and really contemplated God's grace in sending His son to become fully human even as he stayed fully divine? What if we spent time pondering what God was doing in our lives through our family, friends and church? What if, like Mary, we carefully listened that we might in turn deeply think on the grace of God in our lives and how we may share that with others to bring encouragement to them?

Some of Mary's contemplation is beautifully proclaimed in what we now know as her "Magnificat" (Lk 1:46-55). Palestrina, Bach and Mozart have set this declaration of God's greatness to music. Why did God choose this fragile and 'least of these' vehicles to give birth to His Son? We get to 'ponder in our hearts' that mystery during Advent even as we ponder the work of God in our own lives.

-Deacon Lauri Diamond

***Practice 1 Act of Contemplation**

WEDNESDAY

Joseph: Contemplation

"But, as he considered these things..."

Every year during this season Jesus is immortalized in porcelain, plastic, and living stage representation. He is with the Holy Family as a baby. Mary, the icon of maternal love, bowed low, gazes upon Jesus adoringly. Joseph stands proudly by her side, staff in hand, in the role of protector. We know a lot about Jesus and about Mary, but who is this man Joseph?

He is silent, having no speaking part in the bible. He is a craftsman, a carpenter, who, unlike others around him, may have known that this son would not carry on his father's trade. He is a man whose death is unrecorded but implied by his absence in Jesus' early ministry.

While we know little about Joseph, Matthew, the redeemed tax collector, tells us of a particular circumstance surrounding the birth of Jesus that created an ethical dilemma for Joseph. He finds his wife to be pregnant, and he is not the father. This calls for him to put her away publicly to absolve himself in the affair, but Matthew tells us that Joseph was "a just man and unwilling to put her to shame" (Matthew 1:19). Instead he resolves to quietly put her away to protect her at great cost to his own reputation, but even as he makes the decision, Matthew records that he continued consider these things (Matthew 1:20). While Joseph waited to confront Mary, waited to see how all this terrible news would turn out, waited to discover what would happen to him and his business as he made this choice, we witness Joseph practicing contemplation or seeking the Lord and being open to God's movement in his life. And God does move as Joseph simply lifts his heart to the Lord. God gives Joseph a dream that further guides this devout man to take Mary as his wife despite what the future might hold for him (Matthew 1:20-23) .

This contemplative life of prayer is further seen in Joseph following the visit of the wisemen. Again, in the midst of waiting to return home and waiting to understand more about Jesus, Joseph again receives a vision in a dream. Guided by this angelic visitation he leads his family to escape Herod. Yet, in fleeing Israel, Joseph enters another season of waiting where he must keep his family in a foreign land until Herod dies. In this time of waiting Joseph again receives a dream. Throughout all of his times of waiting, Joseph contemplates or ponders deeply where he is, what his options are and lifts his heart to God. God responds each time to Joseph offering guidance to him and his family.

In our nativity scenes, Joseph usually stands to the side, the man looking on, yet not central in the Christmas story. He is the father, but not really the father. He is the one who dreams and is asked to leave everything familiar and wait. We can imagine, and perhaps relate to, what it is to live through a season of fear and displacement. In his times of waiting, Joseph does not grumble or protest, he practices contemplation, giving his heart over to God.

Contemplation draws us into what Richard Foster calls “beautiful of soul” where “put simply, the contemplative life is the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us.” So, again, we are brought back to the familiar scene of the nativity. In that scene, Joseph lived his life gazing upon Jesus, the soul of God. It reflects his actual life, one lived in contemplation of God throughout all his times of waiting.

-Sheila Jackson

***Practice 1 Act of Contemplation**

Simeon: Contemplation

Nunc dimittis servum tuum: "now lettest thou thy servant depart..."

Luke investigates the facts about Christ and explains his intent like this: "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). He begins his gospel with the familiar Christmas passages, but also shares with us the account of Jesus being presented at the Temple in Jerusalem.

As context, the people of Israel had suffered for generations, enduring oppression and hardship while praying for relief through the arrival of a Messiah. As Israel groaned under Roman rule, a righteous and devout resident of Jerusalem named Simeon was filled with the Spirit and "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that "he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). In anticipation of the Messiah, Simeon stayed near the temple to pray and seek God.

Prayer is pivotal in the contemplative life. Simeon lived his life as a period of waiting for God to fulfill his promise. Every day was a time of waiting for Simeon as he pondered how God would fulfill His promise. But in his waiting, we see a man practicing contemplation in prayer. We also see the results of this. Simeon was expectant, believing this would actually come to pass and not losing hope. This was more than optimism. His daily life was guided by what would come because he spent time contemplating the promise of God as he waited. As Simeon heard the scriptures read daily, he listened attentively for God's voice even as God had spoken to him in the past concerning the coming of the Christ. Perhaps he discussed with family and friends what God had revealed. In his daily contemplation of God's promise, we can imagine his longing for fulfillment. We can imagine in those silent moments, Simeon lifting his eyes and asking, "When, Lord?"

As Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple, Simeon was there. He was waiting as he did regularly. With the parents of the Christ looking on, Simeon took the child in his arms and rejoiced, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word" (Luke 2:29). This was the moment that Simeon had longed for over the many years.

As Simeon blesses the child and blesses the mother, we glimpse that God has revealed to Simeon by the Spirit a vision of the fullness of the life of the Christ. He gets to not only see and hold the Christ child, but also gain an understanding of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus would make. He tells Mary: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). After years of unceasing prayer and contemplation, Simeon is blessed to see the Christ and to know what lay ahead.

Simeon spent his time of waiting contemplating God's promises in thought and prayer. Through this God revealed much to Simeon. We too can practice contemplation upon the Word and works of God during our times of waiting.

Since the 4th century Christian worship has included the blessing known as Simeon's Song or Nunc dimittis. This biblical account in Luke 2:29-32 is among the canticles in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. It remains still today in our liturgy so that we can join Simeon in our own prayer and contemplation with these words: "...these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see" (Luke 2:30).

-Sheila Jackson

***Practice 1 Act of Contemplation**

Magi: Contemplation

A few years ago there was a night where there was increased meteor shower activity in the Texas skies, so my family drove in search of a place to watch the show that nature had in store for us. We found out several things that night. First, it is difficult to find a place within a one-hour radius that is untouched by light pollution. We ended up parking on a dirt road somewhere west of Celina where the nearest light source was partially hidden by some adjacent trees. Second, watching a meteor shower is not something that you can do passively. Rather, you must actively watch the sky, searching for those fleeting streaks of light. That night, there was quite a bit of frustration expressed as we waited to find the right spot, and then waited to see the meteors. Nothing was happening nearly quickly enough for us. Can you imagine what it must have been like for the Magi?

When the magi arrive in Jerusalem, they say, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). On the surface, it seems logical. They saw a new star and decided to follow it. But what would it actually take for this statement to come to pass? Have you ever looked at the night sky? How much would you have to not just look at it but *study* it in order to notice a single new star? It would take years!

They also must have been studying something more than just the sky for they say "For we saw *His* star" (Matthew 2:2). How did they know the star belonged to a king and more specifically the king of the Jews? It is reasonable to assume that they must have had some traditions, texts, or prophecies that told them of *this* king and *this* star.

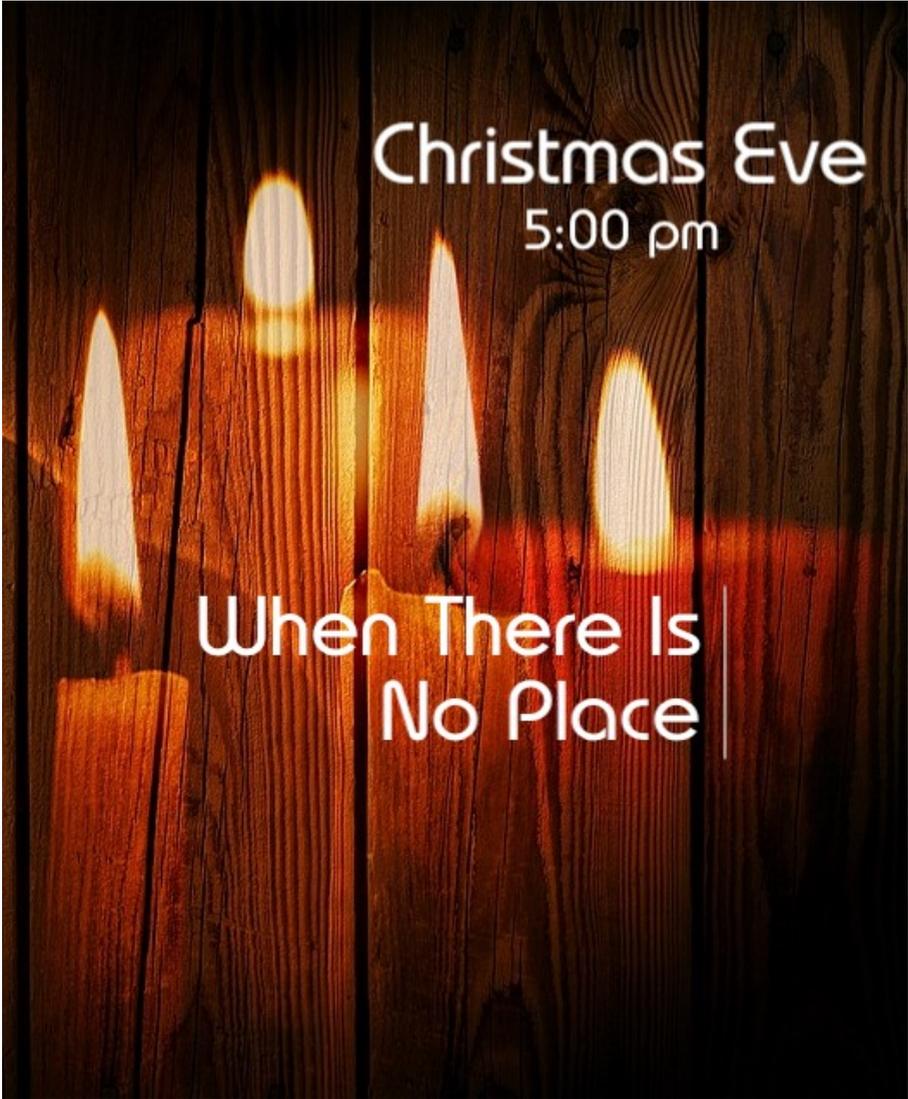
Lastly, they were waiting for it, constantly. The third thing my family learned that night watching the meteors is that if you take your eyes away from the sky for a second, that is the moment that the meteor will choose to cross the sky. We know the wise men saw the star "when it rose" (Matthew 2:2). It is not that they evaluated the stars once a

year to find a new star, or even once a month to chart the paths of existing stars. The fact that they saw it when it rose tells us that they were watching and waiting every night for this star – for years, maybe even generations.

Contemplation is defined as the action of looking thoughtfully at something for a long time. The magi did this. They waited patiently. They studied. And they actively watched. They expected to see something significant. This Advent, while we are waiting, what if we do so as the Magi did? As we wait, we can study. In the study of God and what He is doing, we can learn His patterns and be able to recognize God's movement in our lives earlier. We can also be active in our watching. Rather than passively going through our days, we can look for the ways God is moving, just as the Magi looked for the new star. How is God moving in your life this year, this week, and this moment? He is constantly moving, and if we wait contemplatively as the Magi did, we will find that He has more for us this Advent season.

-Erin Bowman

***Practice 1 Act of Contemplation**



Christmas Eve

5:00 pm

When There Is
No Place

Christmas Eve Service
December 24 @ 5 pm
Chapel Anna Villa