



becoming  
together

SAINT MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

**ADVENT MEDITATIONS**

————— 2023 —————





Welcome to the holy season of Advent. Over the next few weeks, we will all be pulled in countless directions, with demands put on our time and energy. Although we can't ignore many of those demands, I invite you to make an intentional choice to find a moment of quiet each day. I want you to carve out time every day to stop, to listen, and to reflect on what God is doing in your life and the life of our church.

Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation, and the true joy of Advent comes in the anticipation of a moment, an event, a miracle that changed the world forever. This is the season when we remember that Jesus came into the world to show us, tangibly, how much God loves us. And when we truly know we are loved, we can begin to reflect that love to ourselves and to others.

The book you hold in your hands is a gift to you. Receive this gift with the love and hope for which it was made and use it to find moments of peace every day. You are loved, and love is the greatest gift.

With great hope,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Girata" with a small cross at the end of the name.

The Rev. Dr. Christopher Girata  
*Rector*

*"By your endurance, you will gain your souls." (Luke 21:19)*

We live in frightening times. In particular, the war in and around Israel has many on edge. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters are asking, "Is this the end times?" "Is Jesus returning in glory?"

Today's apocalyptic passages from Luke and First Thessalonians might seem to point in this direction.

Luke writes, *"They asked [Jesus], 'Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?' [Jesus said,] 'Nations will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.'" (Luke 21:9-11)*

Paul writes, *"For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them...and there will be no escape!" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3)*

The point of these stories is not to panic or act rashly. In fact, Jesus warns against those who come in his name saying, "I am he," and "The time is near!"

Instead, both Jesus and Paul counsel patience, endurance, and trust.

Jesus says, *"Do not be terrified." (Luke 21:9)*

Paul says, *"God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him." (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10)*

In both cases, Jesus and Paul urge believers not to be distracted by outward signs, but to focus on Jesus himself...to be sober...to remain awake...to trust in the merciful provision of God.

This does not mean being passive or unmoved by deep human suffering around the world. It means focusing on the good we can do in our context. For example, we don't just desire peace, we act peacefully. We don't just refrain from doing harm, we speak out against those who are purveying hate. We don't just resist fear, we encourage those who are beset by anxiety. We don't do this in our own power, but in the power of the one who calls us in love and connects us to the Church.

On November 1, Saint Michael held a teaching and prayer service about what is happening in Israel. Many found it useful. The teaching focused on historical facts, so that we can be grounded when emotions run high. The teaching was followed by a prayer service, where we acknowledged the power of God to accomplish what we cannot, and listened for the Holy Spirit who groans within us with sighs too deep for words.

"Learn" and "pray" are two of our discipleship pillars at Saint Michael along with "serve" and "give." If we focus on these four actions, we will move closer to the heart of God, who helps us interpret the present time, and endure when things are tough.



Cloaks? I was surprised when I noticed cloaks as I read passages in Amos and Matthew. The Bible is not about fashion, but I can't get the contrast of cloaks out of my mind. Each speaks volumes about our relationship with God.

Cloaks can be symbolic. As a child I loved the story of Sir Walter Raleigh who spread his cloak on the muddy ground before Queen Elizabeth I so that she could step forward without soiling her shoes.

In Amos, God pronounces judgment because people are so consumed by their desire for possessions, like clothes, that they "sell the needy for a pair of sandals . . . . They lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge." The people who are worshiping in sacred spaces are reclining on clothes of the impoverished. Only a desperate person would pledge his cloak in order to obtain a necessity. A poor man could relinquish his cloak during the day, but at nightfall he needed it for a blanket. In Israel, a person's cloak was to be returned before nightfall. But there were people wearing their own cloaks who lay upon those of impoverished persons. They saw themselves as faithful because they worshiped God. Amos was appalled that where God was honored, the plight of the poor was disregarded. He said that God despised worship that was blind to injustice.

In Matthew we get the story in which Jesus rides to Jerusalem on a cloak spread upon a donkey. "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." The crowd called out:

*"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"  
Here Jesus is honored as the savior from God, the Messiah.*

What a contrast in Biblical stories of cloaks! Together they tell us that justice is part of the love of God. Redemption joins judgment. The one who will judge is our savior.

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O Lord, our Savior, wrap us in a cloak of adoration for You so that our hearts call "Hosanna," and our lives offer comfort to those in need.

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Today's Gospel reading from Matthew begins with the familiar story of Jesus entering the Temple in Jerusalem and wreaking havoc on the money changers and sellers of sacrificial doves. At least some of these merchants cheated those coming to worship God. Jesus' attack on the established order follows His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which itself was an "in your face moment" to the authorities. This Gospel reading teaches us a few things about anger:

1. Anger can be justified. Especially toward those that exploit others who are not able to protect themselves. And particularly when that exploitation interferes with worship of God and a person's relationship with God.
2. "Righteous Anger," anger which confronts a situation contrary to God's purposes, should be focused and proportional. Jesus saw the specific problem and He addressed it.
3. Anger should not interfere with God's work. It's remarkable how quickly Jesus turns from overturning tables in wrath, to making people whole again by healing the blind and the lame.

Matthew next describes the reaction of children to Jesus—one of praise and excitement. The chief priests and scribes cannot recognize Jesus for who he is, but the children do!

Finally, what is the meaning of the parable of the withered fig tree? It may be a message to the people of Israel, and to all of us, that Jesus expects us to bear fruit. We are called to proclaim His life and teachings, and to fulfill His commandments by worshiping Him and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Failure to do so invites catastrophe.

This Advent season, may we understand what Jesus taught us about anger and apply His example to our lives and to our world; may we love and praise Jesus without reservation as children do, and may we bear fruit in this world that is worthy of His name.

At the close of his three-year ministry, Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover and was hailed by the crowds as King. They shouted to the humble man riding on the young colt, "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus' entry into Jerusalem had all the characteristics of his ministry—humility and gentleness—fulfilling one of the prophecies of the Messiah.

In turn, upon arriving in the Holy City, Jesus engaged in two events that would become symbols of his ministry. The first was his appearance at the temple courts where he overturned the tables of the money changers and merchants and drove them out of the temple. The second was Jesus' decision to curse a fig tree he found on the road the following day on his trip back to Jerusalem.

Why did Jesus resort to overturning the tables of the money changers and merchants, forcing them to exit? Jesus likened it to a den of robbers who were extorting would-be worshipers with exorbitant prices. In the eyes of Jesus, the Court of Gentiles on the Temple Mount had become a shopping mall, rather than a house of prayer, which was God's intended purpose in the first place.

The second event occurred the following day as Jesus was walking to Jerusalem from Bethany, where he had spent the evening. Jesus approached a fig tree by the road on his journey seeking refreshment. The fig tree was full of leaves; however, Jesus found that the tree bore no fruit. Jesus then cursed the tree, "May you never bear fruit again," which immediately withered and died. The disciples, who were accompanying Jesus that day, asked, "Why did the fig tree wither so quickly?" Jesus replied that the tree gave the appearance that it had something to give because it was full of leaves. Yet the leaves were an empty promise and Jesus warned that God's judgment will come to those who appear fruitful but were not.

Let us close with the following prayer:

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Heavenly Father, as we move through this season of Advent and prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ, may we be mindful of the importance of Jesus' ministry and its relevance to us today. May we recognize that you want us to honor and serve you by engaging in activities that follow the teachings of Jesus as we prepare for his coming again. Amen

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While preparing for the Lord's birth, it is important to remember that the salvation which Christ brings is available to us because he actually lived, died, and rose again. The details of his birth are clearly located in a specific time and place with political and cultural events, including shepherds, circumcision, and many witnesses.

In the Scriptures for today's meditation, Amos was a shepherd in Judea called by God to speak to his people who were full of idol worship, complacency, indifference, and oppression of the poor. Those are the same sins that occur in our culture today. In the verses of 2 Peter, he asks *"what kind of people ought you to be? His answer: you ought to live holy and godly lives."* (2 Peter 3:11) Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with the Lord.

In Psalm 18, written by David, there is a thankfulness for God's help, strength, and presence when we go through times of trouble. *"...he drew me out of deep waters" (Psalm 18:16), and "...he rescued me because he delighted in me." (Psalm 18:19)*

How easy it is to be distracted—our daily lives are consumed by exercise, shopping, technology, family, friends, and work. These things are not bad in and of themselves, but everything has its place.

The world will challenge our faith. When Christ returns, who would I like to be and what would I like to be doing?

“Wait” means to look forward eagerly, to remain inactive until something expected happens. What better definition for Advent? While we are filled with the season—lights, parties, shopping, wrapping, decorating—we also need to take time daily to enjoy our Advent meditation book, attend Lessons & Carols one Sunday afternoon to sit in the quiet of our sanctuary and listen, meet a friend for lunch you don’t see very often, make an Advent wreath with your children, take time to volunteer.

Jude 2 says, *“Relax, everything’s going to be all right; rest, everything’s coming together, open your hearts, love is on the way.”*

We live in an incredible city with many cultural and social events. We also have many opportunities within Saint Michael to become engaged. Try something new this Advent season and meet someone you’ve never known.

Amos 5:14: Seek good and not evil—and live! You talk about God being your best friend. Well, live like it and maybe it will happen.

Every morning, get up a few minutes early to start your day with a calm heart. Take a few minutes to read this booklet, say prayers, write a card to someone far away or next door. Do the same thing before you go to bed at night.

Amos 5:4,8: Seek God and live. Do you realize where you are? You’re in a cosmos star-flung with constellations by God, a world God wakes up each morning and puts to bed each night.

The Sunday I’m writing this, our rector Chris in his sermon, talked about “fear” and what that can do to us. We are inundated with this topic in newspapers, television news, and social media by both writers and our politicians. Come to church and hear Jesus’ words—with the power of God’s love, we can put love into action this Advent.

*I’m not trying to get my way in the world’s way. I’m trying to get your way, your Word’s way. I’m staying on your trail; I’m putting one foot in front of the other, I’m not giving up. (Psalm 17:4-5)*



## **A Call to Persevere (NIV).**

Jude 18-19 warns of scoffers, people who cause divisions, who are devoid of the Spirit. Jude 20 tells the readers of his letter to pray in the Holy Spirit, and in verses 22-23 to be merciful and snatch others from the fire.

I texted a handful of people individually and asked them what "pray in the spirit" means to them. I did not tell them why I was asking.

My son quickly texted 500 words. He's a thinker, with a penchant for physics and mathematical proofs. He focused on the word "in" as a location to occupy during prayer, (as if God is a building, he said) but acknowledged that any church child knows that God is everywhere. He thought of two metaphysical options and divided them: 1) God is the Universe, and 2) God is Nothing. In all likelihood, he said, these ideas are one and the same at their root. He went on to compare and contrast and argue fine points of this division until I was dizzy. Lucky for me, he tied the opposing points into one swift package with a perfect bow: empathy is fundamental to spirituality.

An old friend replied next. He wrote about the quiet of the soul, that elusive space free of distraction, where the Spirit reveals clarity of mind and heart.

My sister, the fixer, a rescuer who never met a stranger, who probably has in her purse just the thing you need in your moment of trouble, wrote about mercy. She sent an action list.

My sister, the researcher, referred me to Romans 8. Then she apologized for taking a while to respond, because she was in the emergency room with a sick grandchild.

I wasn't at all surprised by their diverse replies, but I was amazed that they had independently altogether amplified the meaning of this passage from Jude. If I have time to "pray in the spirit," then I can wait for the Spirit to ripen my prayer to its highest aroma. In my timeless heart, I pick mercy.

Jude is tucked right before Revelation. You blink, you miss him. Life is hard. Rest in God. Go out into life in mercy every day. Persevere, in the Spirit, toward the sweet fruit that keeps you from falling.

**Sometimes You Need to “Just Sit on Your Hands!”**

Psalm 150:3-6

*Praise him with trumpet sound;  
Praise him with lute and harp!*

*Praise him with tambourine and dance:  
Praise him with strings and pipe!*

*Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
Praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

*Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!  
Praise the LORD!*

We're in the midst of a very busy season. We're overcommitted and overscheduled. But as we lean into Advent, we still need to find time to stop, take a breath, and step back to reflect on the joys of the season.

Sometimes we need to wave our hands and use them to act. For inspiration, just look at all the ways Psalm 150 illustrates how we can use our hands to praise God!

But there's also a time to be quiet and still.

When I visit my father, we always go to the Sunday early chapel service at the church where our family attended services and my brothers and I attended preschool as children more than 60 (but who's counting?!) years ago.

One early childhood memory bubbles up every time—a clear memory from my preschool years of one of the priests teaching us how to behave in chapel. Of course we all know how hard it is for children to sit still in church. I have a permanent indentation on my right shin from a kneeler mishandled by my three-year-old son in Saint Michael Chapel on Ash Wednesday in 1993, a story for another time. But back then, on that morning even several more decades ago, our priest had a great suggestion: “If you find that you can't sit still in chapel, just sit on your hands.” I remember thinking that it was an excellent suggestion, even for us today.

Matthew 22:32 states, *"God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."* What better time to be reminded of this than in Advent, as we await the birth of Jesus, the epitome of life and of living?

In bringing Jesus to Earth and giving us a role model for how to live, not just overall, but day to day, God reinforced just how much He is the God "of the living." We are given prayer, scripture and Christian community to help us live our best lives in gratitude, and with gratitude, weathering the tough times and being buoyed during joyous times.

On our spiritual journeys, as we seek to become more Christ-like, God supports us when we succeed and when we fail, especially when we reach out to Him for that support. A great example comes from Psalm 25:4-5: *"Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation."* God sent us the ultimate teacher in His son Jesus. During Advent, we can look ahead to renewing our knowledge of the teachings of His ministry, and the impact those teachings can have in our lives.

So, as we await the birth of Jesus and what that miracle brought to us and our world, we rejoice in God's most "marvelous work."

Psalm 9:1

*"I'll praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will tell of all Your marvelous works.*

*I will be glad and rejoice in You, I will sing praise to your name, O Most High."*

People often ask me how I became involved in the effort to fight against human trafficking. I attended a symposium right here at Saint Michael in 2015. I left wondering what I could do. Could I make a difference? Did I have any skills for helping? I didn't exactly "hear behind me a loud voice like a trumpet" as in our reading today in Revelation, but more like a constant, nagging feeling in my chest. Not painful, but uncomfortable. But definitely nagging! I came to realize that this was my nudge, my "loud voice", and that I had best begin learning how I could help and get to work.

Our reading from Matthew today makes it very clear, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Since 2016, Project Moses has taken this to heart! We have grown, learned and made a difference. The members of the ministry have helped survivors of human trafficking with rental assistance, clothing needs for survivors and their children, housing, and education. One survivor, Clara, who received tuition from Project Moses for Dallas College is now studying Social Justice at Texas Tech, and Ava (who also studied at Dallas College) is at Columbia University studying Industrial Organizational Psychology, with a focus in Human Rights. I can't wait to watch these young women make a difference in our world!

We have given countless presentations to various groups around the city to help them have a deeper understanding of the issue of human trafficking. The ministry has prepared and served a lot of meals for survivors and their families. And our team serves on the Executive Committee of the North Texas Coalition Against Human Trafficking as well as other state and national organizations. We have grown! St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Frisco has a Project Moses North group. In their brief existence, they are already making an impact. Recently they became aware of a victim who was looking for help. With an agency partner and working with Plano Police, this woman was rescued.

So, what does all of the above have to do with Advent? Everything! Advent is all about the preparation for welcoming Jesus. Advent is the hope, peace, joy, and love of Jesus that is meant to be given away. Psalm 28 says, *"The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped, and my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him."*

Project Moses is my song. What's yours?

Amos was a shepherd in the southern kingdom of Judah when he was called in the 8th century BCE to the northern kingdom Israel. His God given task was to “preach harsh words in a smooth time.” Under King Jeroboam, Northern Israel was at the height of territorial expansion and national prosperity. This caused, among other things, a “famine of hearing the words of the Lord?” As a result, King Jeroboam and the people had forgotten whose they were and their lives were rife with social injustice, immorality, and shallow piety. They also began relying on military alliances with pagan nations in the face of the looming threat of Assyria. What had they forgotten? God’s word! The Torah or Law was a gift rather than a burden to the covenant community. In chapters 7-9, Amos presents five visions of God’s judgment and His ultimate restoration for Northern Israel.

The Book of Psalms is the hymnbook of ancient Israel, though no musicologist today can reconstruct the tunes. Psalm 119 is classified as a Wisdom or teaching psalm and is the longest in the Psalter, covering 15 pages in our prayer book! The entire psalm is a song in praise of the Law. It has an elaborate acrostic structure in the Hebrew language. Look at verse 1 and note that the Hebrew letter *Aleph* heads the eight-verse poem. As an aid to memorization, each of the eight verses begins in Hebrew with that letter, and that pattern carries through the entire alphabet.

Verses 33-40 begin with the Hebrew letter “*He*.” Pay attention to the petitioning verb which begins the first seven verses and then the hope expressed in verse 40. The petitions could be paraphrased “instruct me, help me understand, make me walk in your ways, help me to be true hearted, focus my eyes on what is good, help me trust your promise, and turn me from evil.” The section concludes with trusting that longing for God’s righteous commandments will keep us safe all the days of our lives.

Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see,  
and what I do in anything, to do it as for thee.

*Hymn 592 George Herbert 1593-1633*

Lord, be thy word my rule; in it may I rejoice; thy glory be my aim, thy holy will my choice;  
Thy promises my hope; thy providence my guard;  
thine arm my strong support; thyself my great reward.

*Hymn 626 Christopher Wordsworth 1807-1885*



Psalm 37 is an example of a “wisdom psalm,” in which the psalmist offers guidance and encouragement through statements that affirm godly values and beliefs while contrasting the behavior of “righteous” and “wicked” people (in a manner quite similar to the Book of Proverbs.)

One of the psalm’s main themes concerns what might be considered a fairly common experience in the world: the perceived “prospering” of those who consistently choose harmful and hurtful means of going about their business (vs. 1, 7, 35). It is not that difficult to name specific individuals alive today who seem to fit this description. Feelings of anger, resentment, or even resignation at this apparent “injustice” are quite natural.

But the psalmist encourages us to look at these situations from another perspective: it might appear that the “wicked” are continually succeeding, are always in power, or will “get away with” their immoral deeds or ill-gotten gains. But, in truth, their prosperity is temporary (vs. 2, 9-10, 12-13, 20, 36-38) and God’s justice always prevails in the end (vs. 7-9, 12-13, 34-38). It can be difficult, even painful, to hope and wait for the Lord to enact God’s perfect justice (even more so if we do not live to see such justice for ourselves). But this is exactly the type of wisdom the psalmist exhorts us to pursue (vs. 34), reminding us that, one day, “the wicked [and everything of them] will be no more” (vs. 10).

Additionally, the psalmist offers an alternative to spending one’s time, taking note of the lives of others—focus instead on living your own life in as godly a way as possible. At one point, it seems like the psalmist states that the Lord will keep those who love and follow God from all harm, ensuring that all their needs will always be met (vs. 23-26). Later, however, the psalmist acknowledges the troubles that occur in life, even to “righteous” people (vs. 39-40). It is within this conclusion that the true message of Psalm 37 can be found: despite what may (or may not) happen, God is always there to help and comfort those who love and follow the Lord. The people who trust in God without fear or anxiety (vs. 3-4), who wait patiently for the Lord to act (vs. 7, 34), and who commit themselves to living good, generous, wise, and honest lives (vs. 3, 5, 21, 30) are the ones that God will reward, alleviating their pain and rescuing them from the effects of others’ sin (vs. 4-6, 39-40).

God chose Haggai, a Hebrew prophet, to restart the second building of the temple in Jerusalem. He shows up 16 years after the rebuilding stalled. The people stopped due to their fear of opposition under King Artaxerxes. (Ezra 4) God called upon Haggai to get the work back on track.

*"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" (Haggai 1:4)*

When the work stopped, the people turned inward and worked on their own homes and needs, leaving the temple with barely a completed foundation. Haggai shares what the Lord God has to say about their distractions:

*"Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." (Haggai 1:5-6)*

Fear along with misplaced priorities put the temple on the people's back burner. How often do we get busy with to do's, tending our houses, and enjoying food and drink without a passing thought of God's love and mercy? We, too, can spend our money as if our pockets or purses have holes in them.

We are in a season when we can place God's house, our St. Michael church community, first. This is a special time when we can rebuild together for God's glory. Haggai called the people to pay attention, to set aside fear, and put God's work first. Can we let Haggai's encouragement enjoin us today?

*"Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people 'I am with you,' declares the Lord. (Haggai 1:13)*

The Lord is with us as we embark on building St. Michael's future. May we respond and build together what He has called us to do.

The Book of Haggai records the middle of 6th century BC when Jewish exiles started returning from Babylon. The Temple decayed in their absence, and those in the initial returning waves quickly gave up on a robust effort to rebuild it. The Lord's Temple was (and is) the connection with his chosen people. Their duty to restore its glory mutually benefited God and his followers. The prophet pulls no punches, "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?" Beyond that, God's powers witnessed in Egypt will be seen again beyond any doubt. Haggai conveys God's exhortation to inspire them for constructive labors that restore and rebuild more than just the Temple, but even greater, their harmony between themselves and with the Lord (v. 9).

The connection to Saint Michael 2023 and beyond cannot be missed. Our forebears gave of their time, talents, and treasure to plant our cornerstone and then feed its growth over the decades. The beauties (and necessary functions) of our campus are integral to our mission. We should think and pray on how we can pitch in to make the latter glory of our house greater than the former.

Hundreds of years sit between Haggai's recording and Jesus' time on Earth. I cannot answer the mystery of one section of the Bible where the restoration of the Temple is the needed remedy; then, in a later book, the absolute destruction of the Temple triggers the ultimate reckoning on Earth. During Advent 2023, it is impossible to evade connecting the Holy Land presently wracked in tumult with what Christ foretells his disciples to open the 24th chapter of Matthew. War is unleashed. Innocents on both sides are dying by explosion, shrapnel, structural collapse, infection, starvation, and dehydration. Beyond the physical damage, the exponential jumps of technology amplify information warfare today far beyond the disciples' comprehension of what is described in verses 6 and 11. If I had been present to hear Jesus' vision, it would have filled me with the greatest of trepidation. The end of the described tribulations offers hope to those who endure. The "how" for the endurance is what we do not precisely understand, and our faith must guide us seemingly at every step.

From both the Old and the New Testament we take away that God's vision for us illustrates greater future glories after surviving prior sufferings. Such triumph is not an achievement that we alone can assure—it is a gift for which we labor to be worthy (Hymn 541).

Today we light the third candle of Advent, the candle that most often represents of the virtue of Joy. We watch with bated breath, and our anticipation for the coming King builds with the growing light. The Gospel reading given to us today depicts Jesus refuting claims against his identity as the Son of God. Anticipating the Pharisees' arguments, Jesus concedes to the crowd that no one person's testimony can be sufficient to judge the truth. If they need to put their faith in a more reputable source, Jesus tells them to look no further than his cousin, John the Baptist. John alone was a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for Christ. His testimony was true, and Jesus says he is like a lamp burning in the night. But, Jesus continues, there is a far greater voice declaring exactly who he is—the voice of God. It echoes through all of scripture, through the prophets, and through Jesus himself, yet the Pharisees still cannot recognize it. If John's voice is like a lamp to a darkened world, the voice of God is like the sun.

Isn't this monumental truth about Jesus precisely what we rehearse together each year? Each week in the Advent season, we light a new candle, and with it our light burns a bit brighter. Each week, we join John in preparing a way for the Lord. Each week, our collective voice becomes a little louder. The Advent Joy we celebrate today is both a promise and a reminder. It lays bare the truth that a day is coming soon when the whole world will be illuminated by God's love. But the candle also reminds us of the great and present need for that light.

In his book, *For All God's Worth*, N.T. Wright reminds us that "Christmas is God lighting a candle; and you don't light a candle in a room that's already full of sunlight. You light a candle in a room that's so murky that the candle, when lit, reveals just how bad things really are. The light shines in the darkness, says St. John, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Nearly every day we are met with news about death and destruction. We carry our own grief alongside our anxieties for the world. We can become inundated by the brokenness around us and can find ourselves simply going through the motions of living. Whether you find yourself approaching Christmas full of hope and optimism, or weary with grief and exhaustion, I pray that you might find real and lasting joy in the light of God that illuminates the darkness and promises to make all things new.

The 50,000 Jewish refugees to whom Zechariah ministered were struggling. They had returned from Babylonian captivity to a war-devastated land to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. As they began that work, the aggressive neighbors surrounding them opposed their efforts and threatened them. God then raised up Zechariah, whose name means "whom the Lord remembers," with the message "Return to Me that I may return to you," says the Lord of Hosts." (Zechariah 1:3)

Our reading today recalls the first of many visions recorded in the book of Zechariah. He saw a dark grove of myrtle-trees, down in a ravine, hidden by the adjacent hills, representing the low, dark, lonely, melancholy condition of the refugees. In other words, they felt abandoned by God. Zechariah saw a man riding a red horse among the myrtle trees, an "angel of the Lord" proclaiming, "I will return to Jerusalem with mercy." In other words, they are not forgotten. Many scholars believe the angel of the Lord in this passage is Jesus Christ in preincarnate form.

Louie Giglio tells the story of the last days of his father in the hospital. He was a lapsed Catholic and had been disabled for seven years from several brain surgeries and complications. He leaned over to encourage his father, "God is for you. God loves you, Dad. God is here. God is available. I love you. We love you." And his dad looked at Louie and said, "Ace, nobody ever wanted me, and nobody ever loved me. And I don't believe God wants me and I don't believe God loves me either." Louie said, "And you talk about the bottom falling out." Years later, Louie learned his father did not live with his mom and dad as a child and was passed around from relative to relative, resulting in him attending three different high schools in his town. Louie realized his dad had lived his entire life without knowing the father's love and blessing in his life.

Jesus Christ came to let you know that you are not alone, you are not forgotten and you are loved. This is the Father's blessing in dark times. Louie resided that day to be way more intentional about sending blessing up his family tree than he had been doing. "I got to see my dad as a son, not as a father. And that was a revelation for me." We are all sons and daughters of the King. This Advent, take the message of the Incarnation to heart and then share that blessing with someone who feels alone, forgotten, and unloved this Christmas.



It seems to me this lesson actually begins in Matthew 24:30, because it is in verse 30 that the setup of this extraordinary confrontation begins: *"At that time, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky and all the nations of the earth will mourn..."* Good grief, so THAT's what'll happen when we get Jesus back?!

The paragraph gives some advice about keeping an eye out for this cataclysmic event. Interestingly enough, not an eye for portents and fantasies—but an eye out for summer and new growth and sweet figs. Still, the terrifying limits of time itself undergird the whole anticipation. Because the very next verse tells us: *"No one knows that day or hour, not even angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father."* (Mark 13:32) We get a reminder of how clueless people have been about the nature of time since the beginning of it all—basically ignoring the reality which everyone knows and most of us deny with everything we actually do: there is such a thing as an end, and no one knows when it is coming. "That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."

When God created the world, He made time itself, but he made it by separating day from night. It was man who cut and diced the day—with the sundial, the obelisk and the clock and finally with a computer on our writs. I suppose our motivation is an illusion control over something over which only God Himself has any real power. He made Time and He alone knows when it will meet an inevitable demise.

The truth is that Jesus walks into our lives and erases most all measurement. We are the ones who keep saying, as children so often and so annoyingly do: "Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Or else: When do all those things come due? Or else: Can I have my candy yet?" We are we are the ones who feel the press of "not enough time" most of our minutes. As if we had any real choice at all about how long we have until whatever the big event is ... and honestly, isn't there only one big event?

Yet ultimate reality remains. Only God the Father, creator of all Life, knows the day and hour of His coming.

Yet come He will ....

To the beds of our dying

Or on clouds of glory

Or as tendering of the fig leaves announce our perfect summer.

*After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'<sup>2</sup> At once I was in the spirit,[a] and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!<sup>3</sup> And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.<sup>4</sup> Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.<sup>5</sup> Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God;<sup>7</sup> and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.*

*Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:<sup>7</sup> the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.<sup>8</sup> And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,*

*'Holy, holy, holy,*

*the Lord God the Almighty,*

*who was and is and is to come.'*

*<sup>9</sup> And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever,<sup>10</sup> the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,*

*<sup>11</sup> 'You are worthy, our Lord and God,*

*to receive glory and honour and power,*

*for you created all things,*

*and by your will they existed and were created.'*

*(Revelation 4:1-10)*

## Advent Reflection

Why are we reading a passage from the Revelation of John about the throne room of God four days before we celebrate the birth of our Lord? I recently preached on a different passage from Revelation at one of our Noonday Eucharists, and after the service I heard the familiar comments we preachers and teachers receive whenever we turn to this book of our Bible. It is too confusing to understand, even after trying many times to read it. I agree it is very challenging, but I also believe wrestling with this prophecy of John can give us some wonderful insight into the nature of God, the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, and the assurance of the eventual complete defeat of all evil and darkness.

This assurance of God starts right here in this passage. First notice the one who is speaking. Referring to Chapter 1, you will find that it is Jesus, the Son of Man. Jesus is showing John the things that will take place, this vision of prophecy of things to come. Note especially that the door to heaven is open. There is now a passageway that we can go through to leave earth here and go to heaven there. When you read closely, you will find that the dome of Earth, the ceiling of creation, is the floor of heaven, and there is now an open door connecting the two.

Through the spirit of God, John goes through the door to the throne room where he sees God the Father revealed in all the incredible imagery of precious stones, strange creatures, lightning, thunder and rainbows. This imagery to the New Testament prophet, would have been very familiar to early Christians, because it echoes the imagery of their Old Testament Prophets, Isaiah and Ezekiel. All of this demonstrates the glorious majesty, knowledge, wisdom, and power of God.

Around the throne are 24 elders. Many people believe that the elders are the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel along with the 12 apostles. Thus, John again sees the old tied with the new, where together, they are worshiping God as they wait for the things that will come.

So why this passage four days before Christmas Eve? Because we too are waiting for the final vanquishing of all things dark and evil. The good news is that the stage is set, the story of how that door in heaven was opened is about to start. And it begins with a child who was born in Bethlehem.

"If the thing happened, it was the central event in the history of the Earth." – CS Lewis

Advent is the great prologue to the story of our salvation. It lays out all the expectations, it tempts us with just enough mystery to make us wonder, and it lays the foundation for the end of the story.

We see a bit of the conclusion in the Revelation to John, glimpsing the heavenly worship taking place around God's throne once the story of this universe is complete. We hear the hymn rising to God: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." It's a reminder of the fact that God is the Creator of the cosmos, the creator of the tiniest particles to the vast expanse of galaxies—it is all the result of God's divine will and creative power.

It is this same power of creation that is the power of the Incarnation. In the passage from Revelation, you'll notice that the angels search for the one who is worthy to open the scroll, and we are reminded that only the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David," Jesus Christ, has triumphed so that he can open it.

In this moment we connect creation to its fulfillment in one continuous motion of salvation. Everything in Jesus' story points to this moment. And it reveals in the Incarnation of Christ the depths of God's love and God's desire to redeem and restore all of creation. In Christ, we see God's willingness to take on human flesh, to dwell among us, and to ultimately sacrifice himself for our salvation.

The world, with its fusion of beauty and brokenness, is an expression of God's glory. And the One who created the Heavens and the Earth, chose to be intimately connected with creation in this most profound way, to be worthy for us as creator, as the Incarnate God, as our redeemer.

In reflecting on the miracle of the Incarnation and the cosmic power of our Creator, we see that the manger and the throne are not separate, that the one who created the world also came to redeem it. We see in Revelation that the Incarnation is the central event in all history because it is the bridge between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal. May we approach this season of Advent with hearts full of wonder and gratitude for the God who became one of us to restore the world to himself and hear echoed in the hymns of this throne room the similar words we will soon hear at the manger at Christ's birth: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

God loved the world and sent his Son into the world. In the beginning, God created the world and all its beauty and ultimately created man and woman with all the animals of the world. Throughout the Bible are words of hope and love for this world and its people. There are words of encouragement and demands for treating each other with kindness and respect. Each of these readings call us to action.

In Zechariah we find *"Administer true justice, show loyalty and compassion to one another, do not oppress the orphan and the widow, the alien and the poor, do not contrive any evil one against another."* In Revelation the myriads of living creatures in heaven gathered around the Lamb of God and proclaimed, *"Praise and honor, glory and might to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever."* By this proclamation showing and love and compassion to God.

Matthew speaks of a man who is leaving and going abroad who gives his servants gold with which continue working and hiring others to work. One of these servants buried the money and did nothing. Upon returning the man found out what had happened to each servant and how he/she had prospered and grown, except the one. I believe this story to be a reflection on how God has given us gifts to put creativity and ideas and abilities into each of us to make the world a better place by treating our fellow humans with empowering love so each can grow into the best possible life. We can drive Meals on Wheels, tutor those who need help learning, and respect our neighbors and those who differ from us.

Advent is the time for us to prepare for the coming of Christ and to prepare the gifts for those we love. It is also the time to prepare ourselves gifts to the people in God's world to make it a wonderful and peaceful haven for all humankind.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem,<sup>11</sup> "It is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning in the broken world" This is a call to each of us to live our best lives by giving ourselves to the world to bring hope and love to all.



The strife in the world today is troubling and, at times, debilitating.

How are we to respond in these times? Anger, denial, isolation, and rebellion are all legitimate responses, but today's readings offer meaningful alternatives to those listed.

The prophet Zechariah writes: *"These are the things you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate, says the Lord."* (Zechariah 8:16-17)

In the Gospel of Matthew, the message gets a little more prescriptive.

*The Son of Man will separate the sheep from the goats; those on his right hand that are blessed and those on the left hand that are cursed.* (Matthew 25:33)

The major question is, "What separates the two?"

Those on his right answered the call!

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

While there are many biblical examples of how we should treat each other, to me, none seem as clear as these two passages.

At Saint Micheal and All Angels, we are blessed with Mission & Outreach and Pastoral Care ministries that embody the readings of today. The question is "Are we doing enough?"

Project Moses is just one of these ministries that is working to help those in need. The victims of the scourge of human trafficking are afflicted with all of the miseries mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. Our focus is to make everyone aware of this issue and to support the survivors of this crime with the resources we have as a ministry.

It is our duty as Christian disciples to help those less fortunate than ourselves. When the strife of the world is troubling you, look to your community to respond in a way that we are biblically directed. The opportunities to serve others are, unfortunately, abundant. Advent Season offers us the opportunity to reflect on how we can be "on the right hand" by responding to those in need around us!

By the time we get to this day, several things may have happened to us as we traveled the season of Advent. One, we have spent time preparing our homes for the early season of Christmas, which in many ways began in early November with the music, television, movies and retail promotions. So, after the presence and repetition of "Deck the Halls..." we may be ready for the expectation of Christmas Day to be over. The City of Dallas begins to pick up discarded Christmas trees by January 1st. Seven days after the miracle, Christmas is over for many. I believe they have missed the great message of the season of Christmas. That is, God invaded our world and our reality as a baby to change the way we look at things and the people around us.

In today's Gospel reading for Morning Prayer, we find the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in the middle of the night. In the conversation, Jesus is trying to educate a learned person like Nicodemus regarding God's purpose in sending His Son into this world. It is to receive eternal life through believing in Jesus as the Messiah. It is not to be condemned, but rather to be saved through Jesus.

Bigger than any gift under our Christmas tree is the gift of God's Son, so that we may receive eternal life. I have come to value Jesus' presence with me after my diagnosis of lung cancer. I do not walk alone, neither does anyone else since the Miracle in Bethlehem.

Micah 4:1-5,5:2-4 | 1 John 4:7-16 | John 3:31-36 | Psalms 2,85,110:1-7,132

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Micah 4:2)*

Merry Christmas to you! After the journey of Advent, we have arrived at the feast of God's Incarnation in the person of Jesus. Today we are reminded that God's love for us—for you—is so powerful that God came to experience what we experience. God's love transcends the limits of our earthly life and becomes the bridge by which we can be with God completely.

This Christmas, remember the words of the prophet, Micah, who dreamed of a reality in which we can grow close to God. He dreamed of a time when God would be able to teach us his ways so we can walk in his paths. Micah's dream is like so many of the prophets—a dream that has been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

Today, we are reminded once more that God is inviting us into a life that is radically different than the life the world would have us live. Each of us struggles to walk the fine line of living in the world but not being of the world. And each of us is called to commit our time, talent, and treasure to build up God's kingdom through our own discipleship.

The commitment of discipleship is the challenge of our lives. We are pulled in countless ways to invest ourselves in good things. Whether those good things are our jobs, our families, or many other things, we have a finite amount of time. However, we have been created by God, and everything we are and everything we do is meant to be an extension of our identity in God. For our impact to be realized, we must answer God's call.

Micah dreamt of the opportunity to learn from God and to walk in his paths, but first, we must go up the mountain. As we look upon a new year, you're invited to journey up God's holy mountain with your Saint Michael family. You're being called by God to commit yourself to the journey for which you were made. The journey may challenge you, but the transformation will be worth every bit of effort.

This year, together, let us commit to a transformed life. Together, let us be the hands and feet of God in the world, helping to meet the needs of those near and far, beginning with ourselves. May God bless you this day and forever more.

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