



Advent and Christmas

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Also, there's devotionals for each Sunday and Midweek of Advent, plus St. Nicholas' Day, Christmas, St. Stephen's Day, and Epiphany.

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What Is Advent?

The journey from Advent 1 to Epiphany unfolds as all good stories should, step by step, perhaps so we don't get *too* stunned by the awesome truth it bears. There's enough direct truth there to keep us on track and focused on it, and enough mystery and open room to fire the imagination -- from ordinary imaginations like mine, to great imaginations like T.S. Eliot and Dr. Seuss, to transcendent imaginations like your average 6-year old.

The word 'advent' is Latin for 'a coming or arrival'. The idea behind it is that God came to earthly life and lived among us, which is news to stop the presses for. It's something to celebrate, rejoice, because just by being in it, God was giving the supreme blessing to the created world. But this birth led to an execution of this same God on behalf of us, and then the greatest news that death will not end it all. So it's not something you just go rushing into. We need to take stock of what that baby Jesus was here for.

When we see the baby and the birth, the adult Jesus and His execution are also in sight.

Advent is a season of preparation. So's Lent, but it is a different kind of preparation. In Lent, each of us prepares for what happened on Good Friday (execution) and Easter (resurrection). Lent is very adult and serious, because it leads to a death; originally, Lent readied new Christian adults for baptism. In **Advent**, we thank God for Christ's first coming, prepare for his final coming at the end of time, and celebrate Christ's presence among us today through the Spirit. God loved and wanted to share that love. But this existence isn't fit for a god; it's too broken, evil, painful, unjust. So, to rescue the created world from this evil, God chose to come here and walk the earth, to grow up, to live the truth, and to die. The only way to start such a thing is as a baby, and the only way to be a baby is to be born. Hence **Christmas**. Because Christmas is centered in the new hope brought by a baby, it's a very child-oriented holiday. Because Advent leads us up to that baby, so is Advent.

There's a time to get ready by focusing on your own sinfulness and evil, a time for personal transformation and following Christ to the cross; that's Lent. There's a time to get ready by rejoicing that our God is not far away and unfamiliar with the struggles of human life, that Christ is here right now among His followers, that God has already begun to bring in the Kingdom, and that Christ will come again to make it clear who really runs the place. That's Advent. "Lo, I am with you, even unto the end of the age", says Jesus.

History

Advent is a creation of the Western churches that looked to Rome as their leader. There were two main streams flowing into it. The first came out of France, during the fourth century AD, probably from Celtic monks. A period of about six weeks before Christ's Mass was used as a penitential and devotional period, a lesser Lent. The second stream came from Rome, where there was a practice of having a three-to-six week fast during which you had to come to church regularly. This was a fast before the feast of Christmas time.

The current form of Advent crystallized under Pope Gregory I, who set the current four-week length, and wrote liturgical materials for use in Advent. By the 10th century, the Celtic 'get ready' prayers and practices had been fully brought into the Roman form. Later on, the church adopted a system of liturgical colors, and Advent received a purple color not unlike Lent's. The 20th century brought a rediscovery of joy in Advent preparations; this was signaled among Protestants by using the color blue (with or without a touch of red in it).

But Advent has fallen on hard times. For most people, it's become a time to get ready for whatever you're doing with family and friends on Christmas, and not a time to get ready for the Christ child. The bigger Christmas became, the more it swallowed up Advent. In fact, whatever Christmas-y thing we think of as being done before Christmas Day is actually done in Advent. In the US, everything after Thanksgiving is now seen as a part of Christmas. The main problem is not that Christmas intrudes on Advent. The real problem is that people no longer keep their *Christmas* focus on Christ, and then that Christless Christmas saps Christ from Advent. Practicing Advent as a religious season may help us recover Christmas, but it can't do it by itself. If you don't look to Jesus every day in every season, you'll lose Advent, Christmas, Lent, and even Easter. It'll be a tiring rush, not a loving celebration, and it'll be about family or money or image and not our loving Maker.

Commemorative Days in Advent

Active Christians do special things to mark the holy purposes of the Advent season. Many churches

have Wednesday ("Midweek") night services like they do during Lent, only in Advent there's a lot more praise, joy, and song. Those who come are often invited to confess their sins before a priest or minister, or to join in group prayers afterward. Choirs practice music in a more-classical vein, especially Handel's *Messiah*. Chapels and prayer rooms open longer. In 'liturgical' churches, there's always some arguing between worship leaders and laity about whether Christmas hymns can be sung during Advent. The usual compromise is that the Christmas songs start coming in one or two Sundays before Christmas.

The primary saint of the season is **Nicholas of Myra** (modern Demre, Turkey), on 12/6; it was celebration of his day and his reputation for giving gifts to children which bred the name and task of Santa Claus. He apparently had very wealthy parents who died in one of the epidemics that were common back then. He got the inheritance, but started giving it away to the poor, the sick, children, and sailors. He was jailed for several years under the Emperor Diocletian (as were most Christian leaders - if they weren't killed). When he was released, he was quite thin, but went right back to his giving ways. He was one of the bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325. He died in 343 AD. **Lucia** (12/13) is marked by the baking and eating of special cakes, and a celebration of all sorts of lights (partly pagan in origin). **Ambrose of Milan** (12/7) was a key figure in shaping beliefs about Christ. The disciple **Thomas** has his day on 12/21; it's a good day to think and pray about discerning, testing, and asking questions about what is happening around us, especially what's being taught about God. The day after Christmas (12/26) is the day of the first Christian martyr, **Stephen**; it was placed right after Christmas to remind us amidst our joy of those who died to bring it to us. In many traditions, Stephen's feast day is when they visit extended family and friends. In the U.S., most people start their Christmas after Thanksgiving day (the fourth Thursday of November), though catalog firms and retailers try to move it up to the start of November for profit's sake. Thanksgiving day is actually quite appropriate for Advent, even if it is a few days before the season starts. Advent is a preparation, and the best way to start preparing is with a thankful heart.

Celebrating Advent

Because Christmas has become the most important holiday of all in the traditionally-Christian countries, Advent has become a preparation not just for the Christ child but also for everything else that happens Christmas day. Most people spend all four weeks of Advent (and then some!) buying or making gifts to give out for Christmas, scheduling Christmas travel, and setting up the bounties of the big Christmas meal. By the time it's over, we need a vacation from the holiday! In colder countries, Christmastime is when we celebrate what winter holds in store -- snow, skis, sleds, warm drink, fires, snowmen, snowball fights, skating, and a refreshing nip in the air. Cold days can bring warm feelings.

Everyone has their favorite holiday foods. Good bread puddings are made in advance and left chilled to age so that the figs, raisins, and brandy flavors meld. A Gaelic custom is to bake cakes during the last week of Advent, store them, then take them out just before Christmas to spread on almond paste and/or a sweet goo such as frosting or honey. On the days before Christmas, Europeans bake plaited breads in a long oval shape, to look like a well-wrapped Christ child.

Quite possibly the most fun during Advent is found when caroling. Most caroling today is done between Advent 2 and Advent 4, far enough away from Christmas day so that people still have time for their Christmas preparations but not so far away as to miss the feel of the season. The songs are for Christmas more than Advent, and include well-known hymns and popular-style songs, many of which are not at all religious (caroling has always been that way). Caroling also involves cheery greetings, a lot of walking, meeting strangers, comradery, and simple old-style dances. It's a great way to get to know each other, learn your neighborhood, and do a lot of blissful singing. Even bad singers can carol! Just remember it's a no-grump zone. Somewhere at (or near) the end, the carolers often receive a cup of cheer - hot liquid refreshment such as apple cider with cinnamon, or cocoa with whipped cream or

marshmallows, warm egg nog (with rum or whisky with vanilla, nutmeg, and/or ginger; the alcohol can be evaporated by heating it), glögg (a warm spiced wine drink from Scandinavia), or espresso cappuccino coffee (perhaps with light spice). Usually there's finger-food and cake to go with it. That way, there are warmed bodies to go with the warm spirits and the cold weather.

A common Advent tradition is that of the Advent wreath. The wreath is made of evergreen branches with four candleholders and candles, often hung from the ceiling. Since in Advent we're waiting for the Christ child, there needs to be a ceremonial way to mark the time and make us aware of the wait. Lighting a candle reminds us of Christ as light of the world. As the candle is lit, it's customary to sing two verses of "O Come O Come Emmanuel". One candle is lit for each Sunday in Advent : one on the first Sunday, two on the second, and so on. Some in high-church circles frown on Advent wreaths in the sanctuary and lighting ceremonies during worship. Where that happens, those ceremonies can still be a part of how your Advent worship at home. The kids can have lots of fun making the wreath. For fire safety, it's best to put the wreath in a secure place.

In many Latino countries, the days before Christmas are marked with the *posada*, the journey of Mary and Joseph to find shelter in the days before Jesus' birth. The people playing the roles go from house to house, being turned away at each, until a house takes them in -- with a party ready to start upon their arrival.

Another common tradition is that of decorating and blessing their Christmas tree. The Sundays before Christmas (Advent 3 or 4) are often set aside for this task. Decorations include coloured lights, balls (originally reflecting candlelight in a dazzling way), tinsel (resembling the glittering icicles found on fir trees in colder lands), Chrismons (wooden or foam symbols and monograms for Christ), and on top, a star. The decorations stay up until Epiphany, 12 days after Christmas.

The roots of the use of trees and decorations are definitely in Europe's pre-Christian religions. The pagan customs were transformed by the early missionaries so that they express some aspect of Christian belief. Sometimes, the meaning was much the same as the pagans treasured, but drawn through Christ. In other cases, the old meaning was deliberately turned inside-out to bring further honor to God and more cause for the people to celebrate. In any case, the tradition of trees and decorations has caught on everywhere, even among non-Christian Asians who found that they really enjoy decorating for the season. Korean Christians put light amounts of cotton 'snow' on their decorative trees.

Advent is also when many families start making their own creche or manger scene. Francis of Assisi is said to have had a role in popularizing this custom. In Poland, there is a yearly competition on building the best one. In one modern turn on the old tradition, the scene is not made at once, but piece by piece, with each family member adding a piece, one a day in front of the family, telling the significance of each piece, until only the Christ Child and manger are missing. Then the manger is added -- but with no baby and no straw. The baby needs a bed of straw, so the children are asked to do good things for others. For each such deed, they would get a straw to add to the manger. Hopefully, by Christmas eve, there would be a bed of straw to lay the baby Jesus figurine into.

<http://www.growley.com/nativity-small.html> (a link on how to build a nativity scene)

The Moravians created the Advent star, which symbolizes the star that led the Wise Men to Jesus, who is "the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16). This star first started in the 1850s near the traditional Moravian home area of Herrnhut.

Other good Advent resources :

- **<http://www.cresourcei.org/cyadvent.html>** (Dennis Bratcher at the Christian Resource Institute; see especially the notes on the Advent use of the Jesse Tree (<http://www.cresourcei.org/jesse.html>)).

- <http://www.cptryon.org/prayer/adx/adwreath.html> (A Catholic version of the Advent Wreath tradition. A Lutheran version would use sung verses from "O Come O Come Emmanuel", a song exquisitely well-matched to the season, not to mention hauntingly beautiful.)
- <http://www.worship.ca/christmas.html> (Lift Up Your Heart's Advent/Christmas/Epiphany resources.)
- <http://www.textweek.com/advent.htm> (TextWeek's Lectionary-based resources.)
- <http://www.polishworld.com/christmas/carols.htm> (Polish Christmas carols)
- <http://virtual.finland.fi/xmas/index.html> (**Christmas At Virtual Finland**), which has some great old Christmas photos, and is one of the better examples of audio-visual-text integration I've seen on the Web. It also gives many glimpses of what candle-lit trees really looked like. You'll enjoy it.

Noone Knows the Hour

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

First Sunday in Advent

Matthew 24:36-44

To set the scene in Matthew : Jesus has been talking about a time of trouble to come. He warns that many are going to die, and that there will be many false prophets and messiahs. He tells us to look for the buds that bring forth the new leaves of the new world.

Now he tells us something even more ominous : noone knows when it will come, not even Jesus. Everyone will be busy living life in the same way they always have, completely careless about the things that matter most to God. (Sounds familiar? Like today?) Then, "as lightning" (v.27), the Lord returns, bringing with Him the kingdom of God. That's not a problem for those who are busy doing God's work on earth; they're already living out the Kingdom. They have the hope in their hearts; they want what's coming. But what if that's not you? What if you're unprepared? What if you're caught partying when you should be serving? What if you've been foolish with the gifts God has given you, wasting it out of laziness, or worse, hoarding it because you're afraid to use it up?

Don't wait for the Kingdom to come before you start living for it. Part of it is already here, wherever faith in Christ is lived out. The Kingdom life was meant to start here on earth, in this life, in this world, among these people around you. Live it because of your love of God, and you will be ready when he returns -- don't sweat the rest, because it's in good hands.

Father, may your Kingdom come. May your will be done now on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Bob Longman

Something to think about : Imagine that you somehow found out that Christ was returning sometime next year. What would be the first thing you would do?

Having a Wonderful Time in Chains

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

First Week of Advent

Philippians 1:3-11

Okay. Who is this nut job, this Paul? Here he is, imprisoned by Rome (v.13). He could be killed at any time. He's far away from those he cares about. And he has little opportunity to answer the critics who are out to undermine what he has done, to make themselves seem great (v. 15-17). So, what is he experiencing?

Joy (v. 4, 18). Confidence (v.6). Eager expectation (v. 20). Boldness (v. 14, 20).

Huh? Is *that* what persecution does to a person? JOY??

Where's the anger? The pain? The desperation, hopelessness, sense of defeat, or sense of being wronged? Or even a call for rescue? He even sees *good* in this (v.12,18) !! What could possibly lead him to take this joyous attitude?

To Paul, living is Christ. The work of enemies doesn't matter. Christ matters. And what Paul does for Christ matters. God will bring all of Paul's work, and that of the Philippian believers, to completion when Christ returns. All that Paul is working for is already set up, so nothing can be done to take it away, even if he dies.

If we suffered persecution for our faith, would we remember that the same is true of us? Can we be loony enough to live in the joy of it?

Lord, come. Bring us the joy that cannot be contained by prison, the love that overflows, the harvest of righteousness that comes from Your kingdom in the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : take a troubling situation in your life. Look in its cracks, its flip side, under its rocks, for the good God might make out of it.

Prepare Ye the Way Of the Lord

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Second Sunday in Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

A hairy, often smelly, flea-bitten, insect-eating, sharp-tongued wilderness man. Not at all like the well-mannered softies that lived in the king's palace. But they were coming from all around to hear this John. Many would be so shaken by his message that they would be baptized. Some people hear this today and still get shaken up. John the Baptist was human roughage. But Jesus called him a prophet.

(Later on, so did Mohammed, and the ancient historian Josephus took much note of him too.)

John the Baptist was full of the Holy Spirit. That's why his words hit home with so many. But he knew there was a greater power and greater effectiveness than he could ever have. For however much he was inspired by God, he could not send that Spirit into anyone. Could he cause them to put their sins behind them? Yes. Or strive to be holy? Yes. But he could not give them the presence of God; he could only tell them to prepare for the One who could and would give it.

It was John's job to tell of the One to come, the Messiah, the One who would send the Holy Spirit into those he baptized. One whose words and deeds would have even more impact than John's. One who would separate out or winnow the good from the bad, the fruit from the waste materials. One that John knew as friend and family, whom John had already come to respect and highly value, but didn't know as the One. The One was Jesus. Throughout His ministry, and in the early years of the apostles after Jesus' death, Jesus and his followers would keep coming across people who had come to love God through John's work. Some who heeded John's call soon took up their crosses and followed Jesus. But John's call for repentance helps *us* prepare, too, for John was just trying to get people to do what God wanted, and that's how anyone can be prepared for the presence of God-with-us.

Send Your Spirit, Lord, to fill everything about us. Drown our sinful selves in the waters of repentance. Give us the power and guidance to live as You would have us live. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : have you ever gone to a priest or a minister, just to repent of a wrong you've done, just to ask God for forgiveness in the presence of someone else of the faith? If not, consider doing so. It's a key way of preparing the way of the Lord. He *is* coming back, after all.

Rejoice !

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Second Midweek in Advent

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice. It's a theme that Paul keeps coming back to throughout his letter to the Philippians. But the Philippian church isn't doing much rejoicing. They're split into at least two factions, probably more. The reasons for the split are not clear; he warns about common enemies that might come, but they don't appear to be there yet. Instead, he appeals to them to follow examples of how to be caring and self-giving -- Jesus, Timothy, Epaphroditus (the church at Philippi's own cofounder), and himself.

Paul loves this church. He speaks as someone who is himself torn when it is torn, uplifted when it raises upward. He is concerned that maybe they've lost track of what they have to rejoice over. "The Lord is near", Paul writes. And with Him comes the peace of God beyond all understanding.

When our life together is marked by bickering and feuding and backbiting (if not backstabbing), it becomes easy to forget the reasons we have for rejoicing. It is still true : "The Lord is near."

Lord, grant us Your peace, restore our joy, and lift our worry from us, so that we can live in a

way fitting for the nearness of Christ. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : Keep watch on what you say. If you catch yourself saying things to tear people down, think of something to say that might build them up, and say that instead.

Giving and the Giver

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

St. Nicholas' Day

Ephesians 4:7-13

The church addressed here was, as seemed true of so many of the early churches, a divided church, where ideas and fancies and styles set one bunch of believers off against another. Each would work for their own and themselves, not really caring whether the other brothers and sisters benefit -- or even worse, hoping for their defeat.

However, that is not Christ's way. Christ gave Himself -- all of himself. But even that was not enough for Christ. Christ put captivity itself into captivity, opened up the warehouse, and started giving it all away. But not for the sake of giving itself. It was giving with a purpose, **an investment in our growth and maturity as persons and as a people**. Then, the Master made the master stroke: **He called on us to do the same**.

In one incident, St. Nicholas of Myra gave so that a poor man's daughters would not be forced into prostitution. It was a rather sharp turning point for their lives, sharply rising up when it seemed for all the world that their lives would sharply turn downward. The gifts God gave us, material and spiritual, are not meant for us to hoard, but to spend, even just to give away. Christ invested in us, to build us up, and we live off the interest. The Christian call, as Nicholas and many others over the years full well understood, is to do for others as Christ did for us.

Great Giving God, we aren't able to match Christ's gift. But the bag of Your presents is stuffed to overflowing. Help us to give to others from what you have given us. Amen.

Oh, by the way.... Ho! Ho! Ho!

Bob Longman

The One Who Is to Come : the Messiah

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:1-15

John the Baptist was in prison. He was subject to the cruel rules -- and whims -- of Herod. (Such whims would later take his life.) But he was not in isolation; he had contact with his core followers, and there were others in the same situation as he was (or worse). Word was getting back to him about a teacher and healer doing amazing things in Galilee. This preacher was the same man he had baptized not long ago, and they were familiar with each other. But something new was afoot. He was hearing that Jesus was acting and preaching with a potency that had not been seen before. So he sent two of his followers to report back to him, to find out whether Jesus was the one he had been preaching about all these years.

So they went. And what did they see? A man teaching the highest truths to all who sought the truth. Good news spread to the poor. The crippled walked, the blind saw, the lepers were cleansed. Even death responded to him. Acts of strength. Power. Authority. Just like the Messiah John had been preaching about. So they went to Jesus and asked him John's question : "Are you Coming One?". Jesus told them, "see for yourselves!" The evidence was all around them.

Advent is the season of coming. What John's followers saw was just a beginning, a sampling of what the coming of the Kingdom of God would bring. The main course was yet to come, in all its ugly horror and overpowering glory. On this side of the death and rising of Christ, we are looking forward to the rest of it, to Christ's return, bringing with Him the full force of the Kingdom of God. Christ is with us now, too, thanks to the Spirit, and we can live in the wonders of that till all is complete. So, even though Jesus has come, and is here, we still are waiting. Something's afoot, and we wait for it to come.

Father, help us live as the foretastes of your Kingdom, as we await the coming of the One who leads us. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : can you find anything in your life that you take part in because of the Kingdom that is to come?

What sacrifices can't do -- no bull!

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Third Midweek in Advent

Hebrews 10:4-18

The whole idea seems pretty silly to us nowadays. How on earth could killing some poor unfortunate animal or burning a sheaf of grain cause God (the creator of animals and grain) to forgive us? Yet in many ancient cultures, such an act was seen as a must. It was specified in Jewish law. The thought was that it was an opportunity to show to their god that they thought more highly of their god than their own wealth. It was a big deal for the poor, who had nothing to sacrifice. For the rich or for the livestock holder, it was often just chump change.

What's wrong with that? They forgot to ask God, "what do *You* want of us?" When God spoke, through Samuel (1 Samuel 15:22-23), Amos (5:21-24), Isaiah (1:10-17), Hosea (6:6), and Jeremiah (7:21-26), the theme was repeated time and time again, era after era. The Lord didn't want a barbecued steak or mutton chops for divine dinner. God wanted us to do His will. God wanted us to live right, to do justice, to worship no other gods. God wanted our love. It's a lot harder to love than to toast wheat. We can't do God's will **and** cheat the poor; we can't love our neighbor **and** lust after our neighbor's spouse; we can't follow God **and** live as slave to wealth, fame, or power. Guess which one we do.

Instead, God said, "no more of your bull! I'm going to send my Son to you." (Hence, Christmas.) The Son came to do God's will. Then we showed what we *really* think of God's will; we killed Him. Then He showed what He *really* thinks of us : He came back, with forgiveness in His hands, sending God's Spirit to work in us and among us.

Father, thank you for sending your Son to do what sacrifices could not do. Write your ways on our minds, that we may do your will. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : Okay -- so lately none of us have wasted a perfectly good lamb or bull to give the Almighty an unwanted gift. Now, imagine that you did, but, in the true spirit of modern Christmas, God returned the livestock (with receipt) and asked for an exchange. What would you give him?

She shall bear a Son

Spirithome.com Advent Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Matthew 1:21-25

The woman you are about to marry suddenly turns up pregnant, and you know you didn't do it. What are you going to do? Stand there and smile and say, 'It's okay. I'll just take the child as mine'? Not likely, eh? Maybe you'd give her the silent treatment? Pack up your things and leave her there? Turn her over to the authorities so she can be punished as an adulteress (stoned by an angry crowd like in John 8)? Or maybe kill her yourself? Word's going to get out about this, and it won't be good on either of you. And what about the shmo who made her pregnant? Wouldn't bloody revenge be in order? And maybe your prayers would have a different tone when prayed to a God that would let such dreadful things happen to you.

The test of one's character is when one faces the life-and-death decisions. Joseph had to face this. But his character quickly started coming through. No legal or violent punishment for a woman he still cared much about. No mad search-and-destroy mission to shred the other man. Just quietly call the relationship the failure it seemed to be, and send her away to some place where the executioners would not go, someplace strange enough that just being there would remind her of what she had done.

Joseph's response changed when the facts came in, thanks to an angel. But even his reaction to the angel took some character. He could've been mad at God, and said, 'If it's not my kid, I'm not raising him! And hands off of this woman!' (He wouldn't have been the first Jew to have a fight with supernatural beings.) Or, he could've explained away his dream as the result of having too much wine that night. Instead, Joseph gave a yes. Not as momentous a yes as Mary gave, to be sure. But a difficult and

important yes to make. For his yes meant that the son of the heavenly Father would have an earthly father like other humans do. And a *just* man for a father, a man who would raise that son with the depth of character and caring that he showed in this moment. As with Mary's yes, Joseph's yes pleased God and serves as an example for us.

Father, you gave your Son a good human family to grow up in. Help us remember those of us who do not have parents; help us be family toward them as best we can. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge, for all you fathers reading this : how are you providing an example of character to your children? Be specific; list them out.

To do something big, start small

A Spirithome.com Christmas devotional, by Bob Longman

Christmas

Luke 2:8-20

This scene with the shepherds and the angel mass choir is depicted every year by adult actors on stage and by little children in pageants, trying to strike the devout poses from a creche. But let's step out of the world of the cute and the dramatic for a moment, and step into what happened with the shepherds.

Shepherds were often newcomers to the land or hired hands from lower classes. They were not at the bottom of the social order -- it wasn't seen as unholy -- but it was a hard life facing dirt and weather for little money. They lived out in the fields all year, and had little opportunity to leave the flock because of the ever-present dangers of predation and theft. They were just doing their usual work that night -- after all, they weren't yet being given a day off for Christmas.

Why did the angel bring the tidings of great joy to these shepherds? Luke doesn't say. It may have had something to do with their poverty, but there were other poor people in the area, even many other shepherds. We don't even read about how many shepherds were there; it could be any number from two on up. As for the heavenly multitude, well, they were strutting their stuff and putting on a party. I guess the shepherds knew that when a heavenly multitude says something's important, it is. So they ran off to see this baby. Let the angels watch flocks for a while.

The infant Jesus had already come out before the shepherds were told, so he was laying there in his feedbox crib. When the shepherds arrived and saw that the choir wasn't joking, they understood that the rest of what they were told was true too : a Savior, a Messiah, their rescuer, had come. God has taken action, and come into their presence. So now *they* started picking up on the angels' carol, praising God to all who were near along the way back.

God came to us as a baby, died as an adult, lives as God-With-Us. We can still pick up on the choir's lyrics. Join the party!

Almighty God, you made yourself known to us in your Son Jesus, starting as a baby just like we did. Lead us from our baby faith to Christ-likeness, that we may live fully in the freedom Christ has given us. Amen.

Bob Longman

What Is A Martyr?

Spirithome.com Holiday Devotionals, by Bob Longman

St. Stephen's Day

Acts, ch.s 6 and 7

This day marks the death of the early church's first martyr, the deacon Stephen. As with most of the saint-days, and as with Christmas, noone knows the actual day. The early church probably put it next to the day of the newborn Jesus to remind us of the adult Jesus and what following Jesus can lead to. The church honors those who die for the faith, but you don't have to die for the faith to be a martyr. The Greek word simply means 'witness', and that is done by the living. But the ultimate witness is to be so clear about Christ that you get executed just like Christ.

To be honest, Stephen's approach and timing left a lot to be desired. He basically hit them over the head with their complicity in the sin of the world. None of Paul's "Come, let us reason" stuff. (But then, Paul/Saul was there at the time, and *he* wasn't into that, either. At least, not *yet*.) There wasn't much "showing them your love" in Stephen's speech, no "wooing them into the Kingdom". It was very much the talk of a fired-up rough-edged new convert, heavy on the harsh parts of the truth. Take this offensiveness (7:51), which to the unthinking person sounds like blasphemy (6:11-14), add a dollop of fomentation (stirring-up) from the likes of Saul, and voila! Stoning. A legal stoning, given the charge and the required witnesses (7:38). Killing's not justified over words, no matter what the words are, but few ask about justice or righteousness when in the midst of anger.

There are more effective, more Christlike ways to bring people the truth of Christ. But no matter how much of an edge is taken off of it, Christian witness will always be dangerous. It strikes too deep, rings too true, calls for too much change. There will always be people who will identify it as a threat to the way they live -- and rightly so. Stephen's example is that you bear witness anyway, despite the risk, and forgive those who try to do you in, just as Christ forgave those who killed Him. It is Stephen's witness to Christ in truth-telling and forgiveness even into death which made him a true martyr.

Father, make of us a witness to Your Son -- bold, yet wise; daring, yet truthful; confident in the face of persecution and even death. In the name of Death's Conqueror, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : Take a good look at your life. Do you ever allow the good news of Jesus to show? (I'm not talking here about bumper stickers, tracts, figurines, or an "evangelistic" speech noone in their right mind would heed. Nor am I talking about "being nice" or even "good" in a way that noone knows it has to do with Jesus.) If not, figure out a way to do it, or become ready for a situation where you can honestly tell something about Jesus.

Epiphany Devotional : God at Risk

Spirithome.com Holiday Devotionals, by Bob Longman

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

This has been a strange time, it has. You've met angels. You've traveled long distances (for back then). You've given birth in the barn or garage, with a bunch of animals looking on. You've had some local shepherds come by and give the baby their propers. You're finally guesting in a house, where most anyone who comes by goes googoo blubbering over your baby, as they usually do. But then comes this.

What would *you* think if foreigners - total strangers - came up to you from seemingly out of nowhere? Rich ones, to be sure -- top officials from some nations out east where they go around obeying stars and doing other strange things that a good Jew knows better than to do. It's not every day that folks in such a splendid wardrobe come to Bethlehem, and when they do they seek the fanciest digs in town to hang out in. So why are they here? What is their interest in your baby? To buy him? Steal him? Kill him? To report to Herod about him (and we all know what kind of a wacko Herod can be)? One of them goes into his robe -- is he pulling out a... knife?

Whew. It's a container, full of -- precious incense! And he's giving it for your baby !!! And what's this? Another guy is pulling out of his traveling case -- gold ! They're giving your baby the royal treatment -- quite literally, what they do for new kings and heirs to the throne !

Epiphany means the 'showing forth' of Jesus for what He really is -- the One who is the true and rightful ruler over us. But unlike earthly kings, He left Himself at our mercy, where we could do Him harm, even kill Him. Even from the very start, as a baby. His task was not one that could be done from strength, but only from exposure and death.

Father, let us live by the light you shone through Your Son, that we, like the magi of old, can show Him to all for what He really is. Amen.

Bob Longman

A challenge : Epiphany was a chance for God to show the true value of that which looked so ordinary. Find someone in your life who seems ordinary but has great value to you. Then, express that value in a way that looks at least a little bit extravagant or over-the-top -- knowing that you've been understating it all along.