



**WATCH
FOR
THE
LIGHT**

~
*Readings
for
Advent
and
Christmas*

Aquinas ♦ Bonhoeffer ♦ Dillard ♦ Donne ♦ Eckhart
Eliot ♦ Guardini ♦ Gutiérrez ♦ Hopkins ♦ Kierkegaard
L'Engle ♦ Lewis ♦ Luther ♦ Merton ♦ Norris ♦ Nouwen
Romero ♦ Soelle ♦ Underhill ♦ Yancey ♦ and others

Watch for the Light

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Readings for Advent and Christmas



PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Lo, in the silent night
A child to God is born
And all is brought again
That ere was lost or lorn.

Could but thy soul, O man,
Become a silent night!
God would be born in thee
And set all things aright.

15TH CENTURY

Each selection in this book stands on its own. Dates in the upper margin have been provided for those who wish to follow the readings sequentially, on a daily basis.

Advent begins on a different date each year, but this book begins early enough (November 24) to be used regardless of the liturgical calendar. It ends with a reading for the day after Epiphany (January 6), which is the traditional close of the holidays.

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Introduction

Light your candles quietly, such candles as you possess, wherever you are.

ALFRED DELP

THOUGH ADVENT (literally “arrival”) has been observed for centuries as a time to contemplate Christ’s birth, most people today acknowledge it only with a blank look. For the vast majority of us, December flies by in a flurry of activities, and what is called “the holiday season” turns out to be the most stressful time of the year.

It is also a time of contrasting emotions. We are eager, yet frazzled; sentimental, yet indifferent. One minute we glow at the thought of getting together with our family and friends; the next we feel utterly lonely. Our hope is mingled with dread, our anticipation with despair. We sense the deeper meanings of

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the season but grasp at them in vain; and in the end, all the bustle leaves us frustrated and drained.

Even we who do not experience such tensions—who genuinely love Christmas—often miss its point. Content with candles and carols and good food, we bask in the warmth of familiar traditions, in reciprocated acts of kindness, and in feelings of general goodwill. How many of us remember the harsh realities of Christ’s first coming: the dank stable, the cold night, the closed door of the inn? How many of us share the longing of the ancient prophets, who awaited the Messiah with such aching intensity that they foresaw his arrival thousands of years before he was born?

Mother Teresa once noted that the first person to welcome Christ was John the Baptist, who leaped for joy on recognizing him, though both of them were still within their mothers’ wombs. We, in stark contrast, are often so dulled by superficial distractions that we are incapable of hearing any voice within, let alone listening to it. Consequently, the feeling we know as Christmas cheer lacks any real connection to the vital spirit that radiated from the manger. That is the main purpose of this collection:

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to re-forged that link, and to encourage the rediscovery of Advent as a season of inward preparation.

We miss the essence of Christmas unless we become, in the words of Eberhard Arnold, “mindful of how Christ’s birth took place.” Once we do, we will sense immediately that Advent marks something momentous: God’s coming into our midst. That coming is not just something that happened in the past. It is a recurring possibility here and now. And thus Advent is not merely a commemorative event or an anniversary, but a yearly opportunity for us to consider the future, second Advent—the promised coming of God’s kingdom on earth.

Such an understanding of Christmas is possible only insofar as we let go of the false props of convention and seek to unlock its central paradox. That paradox, to paraphrase the modern martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the fact that God’s coming is not only a matter of glad tidings but, first of all, “frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.”

The love that descended to Bethlehem is not the easy sympathy of an avuncular God, but a burning fire whose light chases away every shadow, floods every corner, and turns midnight into noon. This

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love reveals sin and overcomes it. It conquers darkness with such forcefulness and intensity that it scatters the proud, humbles the mighty, feeds the hungry, and sends the rich away empty-handed (Luke 1:51–53).

Because a transformation of this scale can never be achieved by human means, but only by divine intervention, Advent (to quote Bonhoeffer again) might be compared to a prison cell “in which one waits and hopes and does various unessential things...but is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside.” It is a fitting metaphor. But dependency does not release us from responsibility. If the essence of Advent is expectancy, it is also readiness for action: watchfulness for every opening, and willingness to risk everything for freedom and a new beginning.

That is why the imagery of nativity scenes is not sufficient to explain the Christmas message. Yes, God came into the feeding trough of an animal. But it was not only as a baby that he lay there. This child was the same man who was crucified on Golgotha, and who rose again. Within the manger lies the cross—and the hope of redemption and resurrection.

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To recognize this requires reverence and humility. It requires faith. We might ask, “What grounds are there for such hope?” Or we might seek to become like children, and believe. Mary did. So did the shepherds and the wise men of the East. So did the men and women whose writings are gathered in this book. So can each of us, wherever we are.

THE EDITORS

NOVEMBER 24

Action in Waiting

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt

IT IS ADVENT AGAIN. We call this time Advent because it reminds us of what comes from God for the creation of his kingdom on earth. We who are here have been led in a special way to keep what is coming on our hearts and to shape ourselves according to it. That which comes from God—that is what moves our hearts, not only in these days but at all times. That which is to come from God is the most important thing we have, in the past and in the present as well as in the future. It is only in God’s coming that even the Bible itself has value to us, let alone all the other things we call “means of grace.” Unless what comes from God is a part of it, it

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remains like a dead seed and does not achieve what must be achieved if God's kingdom is to be.

There are many today who sigh to heaven, "Savior, come now!" But they are not sighing for the sake of God's kingdom. They cry out like this only when they are in trouble and want God to help them. And they don't know of any help that is more effective than to have a Savior come and put a quick end to their troubles.

When it comes to the things of God, however, we must not be concerned for what is ours, but only for what belongs to Christ. We should do this not merely for our own edification; we must become workers for God. This leads us to God's vineyard, a place where there is not a great deal of talk, but where everyone is intent on deeds.

This is what it means to prepare for Advent. Jesus says, "Be ready for action, and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet...blessed is the slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives" (Luke 12:35-48). Here Jesus is speaking of his disciples and their preparation for his coming. Take note that God's kingdom is not formed by any

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human discovery or intention, however daring and noble, but by the coming of Christ. Our faith, our ardor, must be for this coming. Otherwise it would be better to put aside our meditations on Advent. The reign of God is a marvelous thing. To worldly wisdom God's kingdom seems like foolishness, and yet it gives shape to the whole world, the whole creation, making it God's eternal coming.

It is remarkable that not only God, creator of heaven and earth, but also God's people must be a part of this plan. There need to be men and women who give themselves up for God's kingdom and its justice. Otherwise Jesus would not have said, "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes." It is obvious that much depends on our activity. We can even read between the lines that if there is no one to watch out, God's coming will be delayed. Speaking in terms of the parable, if the doorkeeper does not open the door, it is possible that even the master himself, who has given him the key, cannot get in unless he forces his way.

There have to be people who, first of all, have dressed themselves for action and have lit their lamps. In other words, while their master is absent

they are busy preparing everything in the house for his arrival and keeping everyone in the house aware that the state they are living in is only temporary.

Secondly, there must be people who stand by the door and listen for him and who open it quickly when he knocks. Workers, not slackers, are dressed for service. Slackers wear their Sunday best. A person who is getting ready to work with his hands takes his coat off and rolls up his sleeves so that he can get at the matter without further ado. God has work that has to be done in work clothes, not in one's Sunday best. As long as God's kingdom has to be fought for, it is more important to be dressed for work—ready for action—to make an effort to do something in keeping with God's plan, often against the whole weight of the world. A practical way exists and we must be ready for this with our whole being.

“But,” someone may ask, “what sort of thing, exactly, are we to do? What will truly serve God and his coming reign?” That is a serious question; no human being can answer it. We have to learn to live in what is coming from God every day and to carry a light from this awareness into the darkness. For the essence of God's everlasting order has

been darkened by the principalities and powers of this world. Throughout practically every realm of life there is an enslaving force. It is characteristic of everything, even the highest human undertakings of nations or of individuals; it is egoism. What can we get out of this or that? What will meet our momentary interest? We are only concerned with our immediate interest, and call this good and true. In this way the darkness comes.

We find it so difficult to put God's service into our daily life, but this is because we weak human beings don't really want to know what is true. We live in a mass of wrongs and untruths, and they surround us as a dark, dark night. Not even in the most flagrant things do we manage to break through. We are hardly repelled anymore by murder, adultery, or theft. We now have customs and laws under whose protection one person can kill another. We have lifestyles of pleasure that poison everything way beyond human help. We have customs of acquisitiveness by which some people live at the expense of others. What can be done to help?

Anyone whose attention is fixed on the coming reign of God and who wants to see a change brought

about in God's house will become more and more aware that there exists a universal wrongness that is pulled over us like a choking, suffocating blanket. He will know that the thing to do is to take hold of God's hand so that there is some effect on this night, so that at least a few areas are made receptive to God's truth and justice and are made ready to receive God himself. But to do this work we have to have a light. With this light we can then illuminate every corner where we have some work to do. Then we will see where the garbage is, where there is work to be done.

This is really very hard work, but this is what preparing for Advent means. But look out! When someone holds a light in his hand and shines it here and there, he is immediately asked, "What business have you here?" Thus so many people let their light go out again. It is too awkward, too inconvenient to keep holding up a light and showing people the dirt and saying, "There, clean that up; the way you are doing things now isn't right in God's eyes. Cut off your hand! Tear out your eye! Cut off your foot!"—as Jesus says, figuratively, when there is something about the hand or eye or foot that stands in God's way.

“The light shines in darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.” A light has a purpose; a light ought to shine into our lives so that we can see what needs to be done and set our hand to it and clean it up. Jesus, with this light, was not well received, and neither were his apostles. “If only that light weren’t there,” people said. In the times of the early church, the Christians were accused of causing confusion in the world, of undermining law and religion, and they were bitterly persecuted for this. The truth—the fact that people’s lives are not right—is too much for most people to grasp. It seems like a crime to them to think that things they consider quite all right ought to be changed. The sacrifice of Christ, which makes it possible for a new humanity to arise in the resurrection—this sacrifice appears as foolishness.

So people turn finally to this Sunday religion and holiday worship. Going to worship is supposed to be enough. God is supposed to be satisfied with it and do without the weekday work. But let us not give the name of worship, or service to God, only to things that benefit us, only to things that soothe our own souls.

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Fortunately, many people no longer feel that Sunday religion is enough. No matter how people talk, work clothes must come back. A new spirit is awakening, and there are many who seek for God's advantage, even though they may not know how to go about it. Others may polish themselves up spiritually to get their little souls in order for God. They can do this, but it is not enough. Anyone who has eyes will see this and consider how he can forget himself in devotion to God's kingdom and become ardent for the reign to come—to this he is called.

Closely connected with this first work is that of standing at the door and opening it. In regard to this work one often speaks of the first, second, or third watch; and, I would like to add, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth. We must stand by the door constantly, ready to open it, even though there may be no knock for a long time. We must be prepared for the first, second, or third watch; even if it includes the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth watch.

Jesus came and departed. But his resurrection means that everything in God's kingdom is alive; in every moment there is something happening. He himself may yet come again; he may soon send a

messenger to knock. When the door is opened he will say, "Listen, do this and that; tell the people in the house to watch out for this or that." Another time there is another knock, and the door is opened. This time perhaps the word is, "What is the foolishness you're doing in this house? You act as if things were going to always stay the same. Don't settle down as if you were the masters!" And this goes like the breath of God's wrath through the whole house, by way of the doorkeeper. Another time there is a knock, the doorkeeper opens, and the warning is heard, "Watch out for idolatry! Do you want to serve both God and mammon? Do you want to sit at both God's table and the demons' table? Who is your master? Do you want to work with the methods of this world or by the spirit of God? Truly, my house is not a house of human wisdom, but of God's."

For those who listen for Christ's coming, a knock sounds over and over again. The things that come forth are not necessarily highly spiritual. Sometimes they are very simple things. For instance, we may be told, "Don't neglect your bodies. Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? (1 Cor. 3:16) Why do you drink so much wine? Why

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do you eat so much food?” This seems contemptibly small. Doesn’t Paul say, “The kingdom of God does not consist in eating and drinking?” That is true. Yet for those who want to hear, there is a knock on the door for the coming future of Jesus Christ telling us to live for God in everything (1 Cor. 10:31). It is not only your souls that matter, but your bodies too. Whoever is wise will open the door when God’s messengers speak about this. Whoever is wise will go at it joyfully and confidently.

We must speak in practical terms. Either Christ’s coming has meaning for us now, or else it means nothing at all. Sometimes the knock has to do with our life together, or with the arrangements of our life in relationship to the world. For example, on a large estate there are managers, farmers, gardeners, cooks, and so on. The cook has learned cooking, the farmer farming, the gardener gardening, all according to the customary methods. They have learned their trades well and are able to carry them on, even to excel in them. But suppose there is a knock, the door is opened and they are told, “Listen now, don’t simply keep house as the world does; stop and think how to do things so as to please me!” Maybe you will answer,

“What do you mean? That’s the way I learned it and that’s how everybody else does it.” True, everybody does it that way; but you do not need to. Those intent on Christ’s coming have to bring a different way into their situations. Must things always be done in the style of the world (2 Cor. 10:3–4)? According to human wisdom? Should the kingdom of God run according to what most of us are used to?

A person who keeps watch for God, who lives for his coming, will be glad to hear even about little things like this, even if he is told, “Do everything differently from the way you have been doing it till now.” When such a person hears the hint to do it differently, he will stop and listen. He will ask, “Differently? How shall I do it differently?” First you will have to become poor, and see where you have acted foolishly, like someone who has no light. Then you must grieve that you are not any cleverer than anyone else when it comes to opening the door to the Master.

This is what it means to watch. We have to begin with what we can see. Then there will come times when we are allowed to watch in higher things. If you look for the truth in small matters you will

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not go astray in big ones. You will be able to recognize truth there and carry out the command that comes. Let us keep staunch in our eagerness to do whatever comes to us of the truth. Then there will be knocks on our door, over and over, and God's coming will not be hidden. For devoted hearts the light will keep dawning from him who is merciful and compassionate.

The work for God goes on quite simply in this way; one does not always have to wait for something out of the ordinary. The all-important thing is to keep your eyes on what comes from God and to make way for it to come into being here on the earth. If you always try to be heavenly and spiritually minded, you won't understand the everyday work God has for you to do. But if you embrace what is to come from God, if you live for Christ's coming in practical life, you will learn that divine things can be experienced here and now, things quite different from what our human brains can ever imagine.

