

# | 2018 Advent Reflections



**CATHOLIC  
MOBILIZING  
NETWORK**

ENDING THE DEATH PENALTY.  
PROMOTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE.

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December 2, 2018

# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*"But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand."* -Luke 21:25-28, 34-36



The "coming" of Christ we celebrate in Advent is threefold: Jesus the Christ coming in the flesh, a baby born in a particular time and place; Jesus in our hearts today, coming anew; and Jesus the Christ coming in glory at the end of time. Today's gospel reading anticipates the third coming especially.

The signs, however, are not glorious so much as they are terrifying. Nations in anguish, people fainting from terror, their world shaken and in tumult. The specific events occur in the world of nature: the sea roars, heavenly bodies are shaken. And we today do see violent disturbances in our environment: raging fires, floods, especially sudden and violent hurricanes, earthquakes. For us today, though, humanly wrought terrors seem even more threatening.

These reflections are being composed just a few days after the massacre of congregants at the Tree of Life Synagogue, and the mailing of explosives to a number of prominent Democrats, including a former President. I shudder to think what else may have occurred by the time you read this.

*We are warned: "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life." In our time and place, an even more relevant warning might be: "Be careful, or the urge to violent retribution, racial hatred, and the lust for power that we feel in the very air we breathe will trap us."*

We are told to purify our nation by revoking birthright citizenship, sending Hondurans seeking asylum back to be murdered, revoking treaties that have prevented proliferation of nuclear weapons. The danger is not only outside of us, but in our very hearts.

Immediately after the murders at Tree of Life, there was a call for the death penalty for Robert Bowers. Some no doubt believe that by executing their killer we show respect for his victims, and perhaps we send a lesson to others contemplating such atrocities. It is much more likely that we reinforce the lesson he already learned, that the way to show strength is to punish one's enemies, ultimately by wiping them off the face of the earth. Thus we would continue the familiar cycle of revenge.

The word of God comes to us this Advent with a strong exhortation: Be on the watch, look around, lift up your heads, see what is before you. Pray that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man as lights in the darkness of our world at this moment.



**By: Sr. Elizabeth Linehan, RSM, Ph.D.**

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December 9, 2018

# SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low." -Luke 3:1-6*

Why bother? It is perhaps the lament of the person who returns to confession again and again, confessing much the same sins, the same fears, the same attitudes that fall short of the Gospel ideal. With the best of intentions and a firm resolution, the prayers are prayed, the cleansing received, and perhaps this struggling person walks out with at least a bit of hope that this time, things could be different.

When John the Baptist appeared out of the desert, offering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, perhaps there were some in the crowds who experienced a similar hope. They didn't know who this Baptist was or where he came from, but he was offering them something they could do. And that something, a baptism of repentance, suggested one central possibility: that by the grace of God, things could be different.

As you and I look around at our world, isn't that what we need to believe? And is that perhaps something of the hope that Advent offers? We need to believe that things can be different. When we look at our own lives, at the struggles of the people we love, and especially at the society that surrounds us, we see so much that needs to be different. And Advent calls us to celebrate why we even bother.

Yes, we are mired in our own selfishness and greed. Yes, we see mountains of hatred and bigotry that desperately need to be made low. We see people wallowing in the delusions of their own lies and those of their leaders, dark valleys so in need of being filled. Again and again, the body count rises, the grief grows deeper, and blame is flung all around, as violence is hyped as a solution rather than the problem.

*But listen! There is one coming, greater than the Baptist, bringing a day "filled with the fruit of righteousness." He has called and enabled us to continue a work that we did not begin. He, the one for whom we wait, has begun this good work in us, and he will bring it to completion."*

And so, we bother. We bother to work for a living wage for all, especially the voiceless and the outcast. We reject the falsehoods of evil ideologies that deny the dignity of some, because of the color their skin, or their religion or their country of origin. We reject the belief that some need to be killed because of their guilt, or their age, or their illness. We extend a hand in friendship rather than raising a fist in rage. We build bridges rather than walls and create a space for those who find no room at the inn.

We bother, because one is coming, greater than the Baptist. We work to prepare the way, we labor to straighten his paths. We bother, we repent, and yes, we even rejoice, because in Him it can be different.



**By: Fr. Keith LaBove**  
Fr. Keith is the pastor of St. Patrick Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana.



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December 12, 2018

# THE FEAST OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

*"Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." -Luke 1:38-47*

**"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior."** Mary's words to Elizabeth reveal the depth of her faith in God's promises and His plan of salvation.

As a young woman in first century Judea, Mary lived under the Romans through an oppressive puppet king. A true missionary, Mary, set out to visit her cousin, with Jesus, the Gospel, alive in her womb. Together they were two women in a time when women were valued very little, yet they found themselves right in the center of God's plan of salvation. Despite their challenging circumstances, their faith and hope were very much alive, as they knew deep in their hearts that God would come through for them, even if they did not know exactly how.

*Here we see true evangelization in action – the Gospel does not stay static, but moves hearts and minds and propels people to encounter one another in an expression of solidarity and love.*

Much in the same way, Mary of Guadalupe, who also carried the Word of God in her womb, presented the message of salvation to the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters: San Juan Diego, a lay indigenous man. Mary asked Juan Diego to present her message to the powerful people of his time. Right at the beginning of modern history on the American continent, at the convergence of two cultures – indigenous and European – this message of salvation pointed in the direction of a new way of being. The message had at its center the values of life, love, justice, solidarity, mutual respect, and inclusion that must guide our personal and social relationships and institutions.

Today, over 500 years after the first apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego, and more than two millennia after Mary set out to evangelize and encounter her cousin Elizabeth, we continue to have faith and hope in God's message of salvation and in the abundance of grace for all. As we work in the ministry of Restorative Justice, we continue to carry the same values and missionary spirit of evangelization to become transformed persons and in turn work to transform our social relationships.

We are called to deepen our faith and our hope, just like Mary, even though we are not necessarily powerful in our society. We are called to remember our responsibility to speak out against the many injustices taking place in our criminal justice systems, which affect the lives of thousands of incarcerated persons and their families, and thousands of victims and their families. We are called to work to reform our criminal justice institutions, to end the death penalty everywhere, and to help reintegrate our brothers and sisters coming out of incarceration.

Let us ask Mary, the missionary, the evangelizer, the Virgen of Guadalupe, especially in this Season of Advent, to continue to intercede for us before her Son, so that we may have the strength of faith and hope to carry on our Gospel call.



**By: Marco Raposo**

Marco is the Director of the Peace and Justice Ministry for the Diocese of El Paso, Texas.



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December 16, 2018

# THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*"I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals."* -Luke 3:10-18

"What should we do then?"

What should we do then when there are 42 million people living in poverty in our country? Nearly a quarter of them children? What should we do then? When the children of God are divided by race, income level, ideology, borders, religion, and creed?

What should we do then? When violence seems to be the answer to unwanted pregnancies? When neighborhood disputes are settled with weapons and neighborhood schools are fearful of gun violence? When families are forced to flee violence and danger, even if it means facing denigration, poverty, and gross disrespect? When we find ourselves desperate and at the end of our proverbial ropes?

*This is the question that opens this Sunday's Gospel: "What should we do?"*

The crowds weren't quite ready for John's response, which was to give half of the two shirts they owned. It was a suggestion to share deeply of that which God has so abundantly blessed them with. A "deep sharing," so deep that they were to share of their food.

Perhaps for us, too, this is the answer to "what shall we do then?" When observing our sisters and brothers who suffer from poverty, violence, hunger, and deprivation, perhaps we are invited into this deep sharing — a sharing that extends outside our circle of family and loved ones at Christmas to include those looked down upon, those despised, the "least of these."

The tax collectors became excited when they heard that even they were invited into baptism. The crowd likely thought, "Tax collectors? Really now?" but John warned them to treat them fairly. He told them not to overcharge or judge, because there is something awesome on the horizon.

John speaks of someone mightier than he who will baptize with the Spirit! We find ourselves, too, in a posture of waiting for the coming of our Savior. But during the interim, we are advised to share and not judge.

This season, we are called into Christ's "deep sharing," giving half of our "shirts" and half our "food." The Gospel invites us to go beyond the temptation to judge those who are often seen in a negative light — the tax collectors of our modern day.

In this season between Thanksgiving and Christmas, can we give thanks not only for all our blessings, but also for the opportunity to see and hear firsthand exactly what we should do. In that assurance, we await the birth of the poor, homeless, infant refugee with a renewed grace and purposeful vision.



**By: Ralph McCloud**

Ralph serves as Director for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He lives in Washington, DC.



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December 23, 2018

# FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." -Luke 1:39-45*

Advent is a time of great hope as we anticipate the birth of our Holy Redeemer — the one who will proclaim Life, and will ultimately suffer execution for us, at the hands of the State.

The Gospel according to St. Luke is filled with mercy, compassion, and hope. Today's reading is a beautiful and personal encounter of two women who share the amazing things God has done for them at a time of tremendous anxiety.

Mary travels to her cousin with a sense of urgency. In faith, we need the help and support of each other — and sometimes there is a sense of urgency for that support. We are Catholic community. Mary and Elizabeth shared secrets of faith and they truly needed each other for support and strength during such a strange scenario. Don't we all need visitations in our lives from time to time?

We must seek out wise people in order to be bearers of peace. We must reach out to others in our times of need, and we must also be present to others with compassion and support in their times of need. Mary and Elizabeth are our models.

We remember that Advent and Christmastime are not joyful for some, while feelings of anxiety and deep grief emerge following the loss of loved ones to violence. Yet we are called to be Christ's love, mercy, healing and hope to one another. We were called by the fruit of Mary's womb.

Redemption is born in forgotten places, and a new world order is forming in this Visitation: the new way of love and mercy as proclaimed by the Prince of Peace. This is where restorative justice begins. St. John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb moves with joy at the very presence of Jesus in Mary's womb, and the elder mother is filled with the Holy Spirit. During this Advent, may we, too, be filled with the Holy Spirit and experience the hope and joy of faith as we encounter Jesus in our own lives!

This passage reminds us that our God dwells in those who have been shut out of the powers that be, and that our omnipotent and omnibenevolent Creator chooses to work through those on the margins. May we also demonstrate the love of our Holy Redeemer, as we live out mercy for those who cause the worst human pain by taking another's life. Those on death rows. Those who are not saints.

*Redemption is born in forgotten places... in manglers and in prisons.*

We don't get to choose our calling, right? We only get to choose our response. Let us choose Life! Let us continue to anticipate with great hope!

**God of Mercy, fill us with the eagerness, compassion, love, humility, gratitude and joy of Saints Mary and Elizabeth during Advent and beyond, and bless our mothers with your peace, always. Amen.**



**By: Becky O'Neil McBrayer**

Becky is a murder victims' family member and the sister of one who has murdered. She is an Executive Board Member of Oregonians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and a Catholic advocate for death penalty repeal.



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