

## EXPECTING A MIRACLE

### Advent by the Nativity scene



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*Prepare for the coming of Christ each week this season by reflecting on the mystery of the manger*

**By Susan M. Erschen**

Advent is perhaps the most challenging liturgical season for Christians. The secular world has kidnapped this time intended for quiet reflection and turned it into a time of premature celebration. During Advent, we spend four weeks trying to balance ourselves. Like standing in the middle of a seesaw, we often have one foot in the materialistic world of gifts, decorating and parties, while the other foot is in the spiritual world of prayerfully expecting the miracle of Christ's birth.

A Christmas tradition started by St. Francis may help us keep our focus more on the coming miracle than the latest sales. By choosing the name of Francis, our Holy Father has called the world to pay more attention to the beloved saint from Assisi, who taught us to live simply and care for the poor. One way St. Francis reminded us of our Lord's kinship with the poor was through the Nativity scene. We may think the Nativity scene is as ancient as the celebra-

tion of Christmas itself. Yet, Nativity scenes were unheard of until St. Francis set up the first one in a cave outside of Greccio, Italy, in 1223.

Because St. Francis was afraid his idea might be too radical, he petitioned Pope Honorius III for permission to re-create the scene of our Lord's birth. His goal was to remind people of the poverty into which Christ chose to be born. He felt the faithful were missing the message of the Gospel because they were too enmeshed in materialism. Sound familiar?

We may be able to keep our balance a little better this Advent by focusing on the rich symbolism of the Nativity scene. Inspiring words from Pope Francis, weekly Scripture readings and simple prayers can also help us find new ways to make this season of Advent a time of prayerful preparation, mercy, joy and expectation.

*Susan M. Erschen writes from Missouri.*

# Week 1: PREPARATION

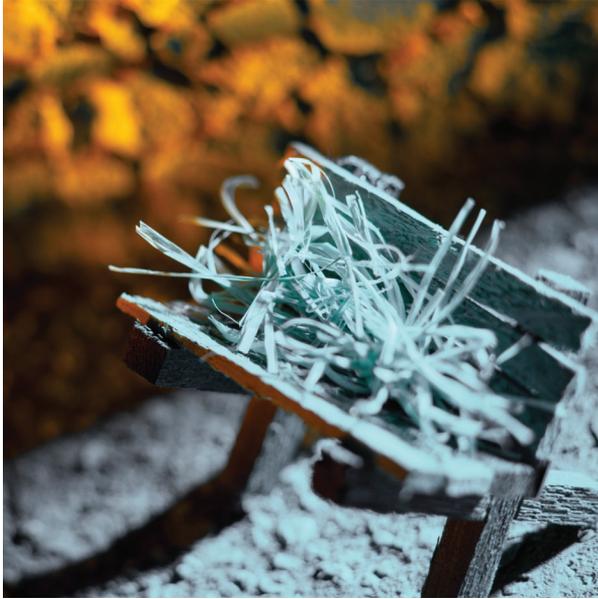
*“Prepare your hearts to receive Jesus the Savior.”*

— Pope Francis, General Audience, Nov. 27, 2013

First Sunday of Advent, Nov. 30, 2014

Readings for this week

Is 63:16b-17, 19b; 64:2-7 | Ps 80:2-3,15-16,18-19 | 1 Cor 1:3-9 | Mk 13:33-37



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## The empty manger

Pope Francis tells us to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. But let's be honest, it is difficult to imagine what a heart ready to receive Jesus should look like. So let's begin by looking at the simple manger that received Jesus so many years ago. This year, consider making the Nativity scene the first and most important Christmas decoration to grace your home. If possible, find a new place of honor for your Nativity set. Try not to hide it under the tree, where it will eventually be buried by presents. Instead, place it on a mantle, a hutch or a small table set up for this special purpose. You might want to put up just the stable and its animals this first week. The live animals were most important to St. Francis in his first Nativity scene. He wanted the townspeople to truly experience the stench and roughness that surrounded the Christ Child's birth.

## A PRAYER FOR PREPARATION

St. Francis,

You spent many hours preparing a Nativity scene that would remind the world how the Infant Jesus came to us in poverty.

Please help me find time to prepare well for the great feast of Christmas.

Show me how to clean out my heart — sweeping away envy, unrealistic expectations and activities that distract me too much from the true purpose of Advent.

Guide me in making good decisions about how I spend my time and my dollars during these days of waiting and preparing.

As I look upon the empty manger where Christ was born, inspire me to live humbly and simply.

Intercede for me, so my preparations this Advent make a lasting difference in my life.

Amen

## IDEAS FOR BETTER PREPARATION

- ▶ **Place a small votive light in the manger as a reminder of the spark of Christ that is already in our hearts.** Pray before the empty stable, asking Jesus to show you where your life may be empty. Ask him how new hope and peace can be born within you.
- ▶ **Sit before the empty manger with a pen and paper.** Ask our Lord to help you plan ways to simplify your Christmas celebration.
- ▶ **Pick at least one way to free up some time and money that you usually spend on the secular aspects of Christmas.** Divert these resources to more spiritual preparation. You might decide to stop some of the excessive gift giving, cut out some of the decorating or simplify entertaining plans.
- ▶ **Discuss ideas for simplifying Christmas with family and friends so all will be prepared for a change this year.** You may be surprised to discover you have been wasting lots of Advent energy on holiday activities that really are not necessary or appreciated. Many people are happy to cut out gift-giving traditions or excessive parties and feasting.
- ▶ **Those who celebrate Christmas with children might want to check out the St. Nicholas Center online at [stnicholascenter.org](http://stnicholascenter.org).** It can help change your image of Santa Claus. By concentrating on the difference between St. Nicholas and Santa Claus, we can better focus our attention back to the miracle of Christ's birth.
- ▶ **If you do not have a regular time in your day set aside for prayer, make this an Advent priority.** Start getting up earlier in the morning, when the house is quiet. Or turn off the radio and pray during a commute, stop at a quiet place after work or cut out some TV and spend time alone with God before bed. You may discover this Advent prayer time will be a gift of peace you want to give yourself all year.
- ▶ **Consider the suggestion Pope Francis repeatedly makes to carry a book of the Gospels with you to read whenever and wherever you are waiting.**
- ▶ **Check Christmas lists.** Remember the difference between want and need. Are you asking for too many things you want and nothing you need to bring you closer to Jesus? How about a religious statue or picture for home or office, a good spiritual book, some inspiring religious music or a subscription to a faith-based magazine? Now is the time to evaluate our Christmas lists carefully to make sure they reflect our commitment to prepare more room in our hearts for Jesus and his teachings.
- ▶ **Think about the gifts you will be giving to others, too.** Have you considered shopping at a religious gift store rather than the mall? Can you wrap up some gifts to bring others closer to our Lord?

## Week 2: MERCY

*“All of us are asked to obey (Christ’s) call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”*

— Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Nov. 24, 2013

Second Sunday of Advent, Dec. 7, 2014

Readings for this week

Is 40:1-5,9-11 | Ps 85:9-14 | 2 Pt 3:8-14 | Mk 1:1-8



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### The shepherds and their sheep

The shepherds who slept in the fields are an example of the people Pope Francis is referring to when he says we must reach out to all who live on the peripheries. Who are the shepherds in our lives whom we push to the periphery? Who have we chosen to alienate or ignore? Who is the outcast in our neighborhood, place of work, family, parish or circle of friends? Who is the one we feel is too angry, boastful, boring, whiny, backward or difficult to like? Advent calls us to pay attention to them.

Not only have we pushed some people to the peripheries in our own lives, but the world has pushed entire cultures, nationalities and countries to the peripheries, forcing millions of people to live in unnecessary poverty. The first reading for this week reminds us Advent is a time to show mercy to all those in need. “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God ... Make straight in the wasteland a highway ... Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low” (Is 40:1, 3-4). Isaiah is not suggesting we power up bulldozers to rearrange the landscape. But he may be talking about leveling the economic playing field for those who live in the valley of poverty while others dwell on a mountain of riches. Pope Francis warns us we have to move out of our comfort zones if we want to give comfort to others. Are we prepared to be more merciful this Advent?

### A PRAYER FOR MERCY

Heavenly Jesus,

Please help me to see you not only in the smiling face of an infant but also in the eyes of all who are lonely, hungry, depressed, angry, hurting, in pain or in need this Advent season.

Give me courage to move out of my comfort zone so I can give comfort to another.

Let me make room in my heart for you by making room in my heart for those who are most in need of my love and kindness.

Teach me to be a person of mercy, just as you are a God of mercy.

Amen

### IDEAS FOR GENTLE MERCY

- ▶ **Let’s start with those closest to home.** Is there a way we can show extra kindness and compassion to those whom we prefer to ignore in our lives? Look closely at the shepherds in your Nativity scene. Is it possible they represent someone God is calling you to wrap in kindness this Advent?
- ▶ **Pope Francis, in a May address to the United Nations Chief Executives Board, encourages us to “... give back generously and lavishly whatever we may have earlier unjustly refused to others.”** To give back lavishly to the poor we must adopt them as one of our own children. We could level out our distribution of gifts this year if we gave the poor the same amount we spend on just one person who is most special to us.
- ▶ **Could you budget the same amount for gifts to the poor as you budget for gifts for one of your own children, even if it means giving less to your own children?**
- ▶ **Could you divide your gift budget for a loved one and send half the money to a charity in that person’s name?**
- ▶ **If there are children in the family, try to involve them in decisions about where and how to help the needy.** Teach them early that the true meaning of Christmas is about giving and not getting.
- ▶ **Advent is not only a time to remember Christ’s first coming, but also to anticipate his second coming.** Take time to read and reflect on Matthew’s Gospel story, “The Judgment of the Nations” (Mt 25:31-46). The image of the shepherd and sheep is used to show who will and who will not earn a place in heaven. Jesus says when he comes again, he will want to know how we have shown mercy to others.
- ▶ **Pick one of the ways Jesus tells us we can be good sheep and make this charitable work part of your Advent practice.**
- ▶ **Keep in mind people are not just poor during the holidays.** If possible, select an Advent corporal work of mercy that you can do throughout the coming year.
- ▶ **Perhaps when you look upon the shepherds you need to see Jesus as the Good Shepherd.** If you feel like a lamb in need of our Lord’s tender love and mercy this Advent, turn to Psalm 23 and remember, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

## Week 3:

# JOY

## “The Church is a house of joy”

— Pope Francis, Angelus message, Dec. 15, 2013

Third Sunday of Advent, Dec. 14, 2014

Readings for this week

Is 61:1-2a,10-11 | Lk 1:46-50,53-54 | 1 Thes 5:16-24 | Jn 1:6-8,19-28



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### Angels on high

One of the reasons Pope Francis is so admired around the world is because of his constant joy. By his words and his example, he tells us the Church should be a place of joy. It follows that we, as members of the Church, should also be people of joy. The angels who hover over the manger came to bring joy. As Luke writes, “Do not be afraid: for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy.” Are our lives too noisy to hear the joyful song of the angels? Are we too busy to look up and see them singing in the night?

Even if we are not yet feeling all the joy of Christmas, we can still give the gift of joy to others. The beauty of the angels was not so much in that they were joyful themselves, but that they brought joyful tidings to the world. For a Christian, this should be a time to bring as much joy as possible to as many people as possible. “The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded. That is what the angel proclaimed to the shepherds in Bethlehem,” writes Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

### A PRAYER FOR JOY

Heavenly Angels,

God assigned you to announce joy to the world.

Please show me ways that I, too, can spread the joy of our Lord to all those I meet.

Inspire me to make gestures of kindness that can help others feel God’s love.

Help me set aside envy and greed, so I have more room in my heart for joy.

Let me greet each day with a heart overflowing with joy and gratitude.

Amen

### IDEAS FOR GLORIOUS JOY

▶ **Look how Pope Francis spreads joy with a smile, a hug or a warm word.** We can give that same gift of joy to every person we meet this Advent. If we just make an extra effort to be kind, complimentary, caring or appreciative to the overworked, overtired retail employees, the frazzled co-workers in the elevator, the surly aid in the nursing home or the lonely person in our parish, we can help them feel joy. Every person we meet has some goodness in them. If we can find it and remind them of it, we can give them joy. And surprisingly, we will feel our own joy in making someone else feel good. Best of all, it does not cost a thing!

▶ **Take time to be grateful.** In the second reading for the third week of Advent, St. Paul gives us a formula for Christian living: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks ...” Joy flows naturally into our lives when we take time to pray and be grateful. When we are caught up in the busy commercial aspects of Christmas, we may not feel much like rejoicing, praying or giving thanks. Yet, if we follow St. Paul’s advice to give prayerful thanks to God, we will discover we have many reasons for rejoicing.

▶ **End each Advent night by writing a simple thank-you prayer of gratitude to God.** This is a wonderful way to remind ourselves of all the blessings and joys we have in our lives. We realize we already have more than enough for which to thank God.

▶ **Families can make it an Advent tradition to go around the table at dinner and have each member name something for which they are grateful that day.** Cultivating gratitude is an important way to balance the envy that can be created by the endless advertising at this time of the year.

▶ **Music and song can be sources of great joy.** Surround yourself with the beautiful music of Christmas. Plan a Christmas caroling party. Let your friends and neighbors hear you sing out the joy of Christ’s birth — even if your voice is not exactly angelic.

▶ **We can scatter joy in fun and anonymous ways by leaving little gifts for friends and strangers.** Make sure your gift includes a message of Christmas joy such as, “Wishing you the joy of the Christ Child’s birth.” Simple ways to leave joy might be:

- Hiding little angel ornaments on the Christmas trees or in the homes of people you visit.
- Leaving surprise packages of candy on the desks of co-workers.
- Paying for the food for the car behind us in a drive-thru line.
- Leaving an anonymous gift on the doorstep of a new or lonely neighbor.
- Sending flowers to someone who may not be feeling joyful this Christmas.

## Week 4: EXPECTATION

*“Our Mother is beautiful! Mary sustains our journey toward Christmas, for she teaches us how to live this Advent season in expectation of the Lord.”*

— Pope Francis, Angelus message, Dec. 8, 2013

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 21, 2014

Readings for this week

2 Sm 7:1-5,8b-12,14a,16 | Ps 89:2-5,27,29 | Rom 16:25-27 | Lk 1:26-38



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### Mary and Joseph

Pope Francis tells us we should live the Advent season in expectation of the Lord, just as Mary did so long ago. Living in expectation of the Lord is different than living with our own expectations. As we enter the last week of Advent, we may still be holding onto our own expectations. We may have expected more twinkling lights on our house, more expensive presents under the tree or a home remodeling project done to impress guests. These material expectations can leave us disappointed or over-stressed. Now is the time to gaze upon Mary and Joseph in the Nativity stable. They had unmet expectations, too. They expected to stay at an inn and have a warm meal. Yet, they end up seeking shelter with animals. Mary and Joseph show us we never know what to expect from God. He can surprise us with joy and contentment beyond our own expectations if we simply place our trust in him. The Lord is coming to do great things for us.

### A PRAYER OF EXPECTATION

Dear Blessed Mother and saintly Joseph,

Thank you for showing me how to give up my own expectations, so I can more fully embrace the wonderful expectation of Christ's coming.

Help me renew my commitment to have a simpler, holier Christmas this year.

Do not let me forget the mercy, joy, peace and hope I want to grow in my heart.

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide me in welcoming Jesus into my life, just as the Spirit led you to welcome Jesus with love and trust so many years ago.

Remind me each day to expect a miracle.

Amen

### IDEAS FOR HOPEFUL EXPECTATION

► **Let us give up all of our unfulfilled expectations for this Christmas.** Whatever we have done is enough. Let us dedicate these last days of Advent to peaceful acceptance rather than frantically trying to meet our own expectations.

► **Expect a miracle!** Make this your mantra when you find yourself stressing out over things you think still need to be done. Expect a miracle! Imagine Mary and Joseph mumbling these words as they settle into the hay. In an instant, their life went from farm animals grunting in the night to angels singing all around them. God has miracles in mind for us, too, if we are willing to trust in him as much as Mary and Joseph trusted.

► **When worldly expectations do get you in a knot, turn — as Pope Francis so often does — to Mary, the Undoer of Knots.** You can learn more about this image of Our Lady untangling the ribbon of our lives at [maryundoerofknots.com](http://maryundoerofknots.com).

► **Practice waiting in prayerful expectation.** Use times of waiting — waiting for a parking spot at a crowded mall, waiting in a check-out line, waiting at the airport — as a time of quiet prayer. Place your trust and your expectations in God's hands with a simple prayer, such as, “I wait for you, oh Lord.” Or use Mary's own words when she accepted God's plan for her, “May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

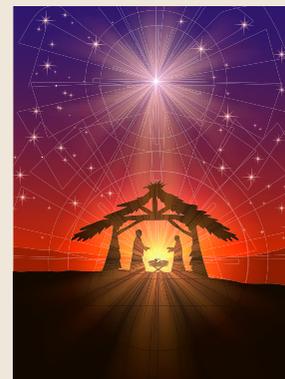
► **Invite others to wait with you.** Mary showed us it is not good or necessary to wait alone. Mary went to Elizabeth to wait. She then waited with Joseph in Bethlehem. We, too, should not be alone or leave others alone during these last days before Christmas. We need to make time to be with others so we can share together this wonderful and quiet waiting. Sharing time with others is much more important than accomplishing one more task on a to-do list. Consider the following:

- Plan an evening with family or friends to visit a live Nativity scene.
- Plan to attend at least one Advent prayer service or faith activity at your parish.
- Invite someone who may be lonely for a warm and simple winter meal.
- Schedule a time to remember Christmases past and to bless the upcoming celebration. Light the tree. Dim the lights. Say a prayer of blessing over the Christmas tree and manger. Ask each person present to tell a story of some favorite Christmas memory. End this time of fond remembering with prayers of blessing for the upcoming holy day, including prayers for travelers, workers and those who will be away from their families this Christmas.

### ALSO IN THE NATIVITY

#### The Star of Bethlehem

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage” (Mt 2:2). It was a common belief in the first century that a ruler's birth was marked by the appearance of a new star in the sky. The Star of Bethlehem pointed the magi's way toward Jesus in the manger.



When we see the star in Nativity scenes this Advent, we, too, should allow it to point our way to Christ.



#### The three wise men

“And on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage” (Mt 2:11). In ancient times, it was customary for foreign dignitaries to visit a newborn king. Let us be more like the magi, who, after making a long journey, knelt immediately when seeing Christ, acknowledging his divine kingship. We, too, are on a journey and must pay Jesus homage.



#### The stable

“She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7). As the innkeepers turned away the Holy Family, so we turn Jesus away every time we sin. As we look at Mary and Joseph huddling over their son in the stable, let us open our hearts to Christ and allow his parents, the first Christians, to lead us to holiness.

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