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Caroling Through Advent and Christmas

Daily Reflections with Familiar Hymns



MARK G. BOYER

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Daily Reflections with Familiar Hymns



Mark G. Boyer



Liguori

*Dedicated to Michael King,
a lifelong friend*

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Introduction

The loss of an hour of daylight on the first Sunday of November signals the near-end of fall and the onset of winter. There are leaves to rake, water hoses to store, and lots of other things to do before the jet stream sends the first blast of Arctic air across the continent. In the colder environment, the sunrise pink seems to be pinker and the gray streaks grayer.

While nature is observing the change of seasons, so is the Catholic Church. The last Sunday of November or the first Sunday of December heralds a new liturgical year of grace. All things begin again. The ribbon at the back of *The Roman Missal* gets moved to the front. The marker in the *Lectionary* goes to the obverse of the book and a new cycle of Scripture texts begins. We see a fresh Advent wreath with three violet candles and one rose candle in church; each torch awaits the fire that will set it ablaze as the solemn season prepares us for the great Christmas feast. As the days decrease in light, we ignite candles on a wreath that point us toward the light of Christ. In other words, newness and light permeate Advent with the fresh scent of newly harvested greens and beeswax—and with the sounds of the seasons.

One of the many things we do as Roman Catholics is sing Advent hymns and Christmas carols. During Advent we express in song our longing for Christ to come in glory even as we prepare to mark his Nativity on December 25. Sometime in November, or commonly as early as October, Christmas songs are heard in shopping malls, in discount stores, on the radio, on TV, and through all manner of electronic devices. The secular form of Christmas is characterized by its own music, just like the religious seasons of Advent and Christmas have their own hymns and carols. We take time to observe up to four weeks of Advent so that our even-shorter observance of Christmas will be enriched with God's word, prayer, and singing.

We may catch ourselves humming an Advent hymn that we heard in church on Sunday, especially the old standby: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Or we might create a joyful chorus, joining the other members of our family in singing a verse of an Advent hymn. Likewise, after observing the solemn Advent season, we sing alone a joyous Christmas carol or join others in narrating in song the birth, epiphany, and baptism of Jesus Christ.

This book presents an exercise for every day of Advent and Christmas that combines the daily Scripture texts from the *Lectionary*

for Mass with religious hymns sung during the Advent season and carols chorused during the Christmas season. The hymns and carols used in this book should be familiar to most Catholics. If not, search for their titles or lyrics online; in most cases recordings by modern musicians in various styles can be found and listened to.

This book can be used by individuals for private prayer or by families and groups. A six-part exercise is offered for each entry:

- 1 The liturgical day is given, such as Monday of the first week of Advent. To determine the specific date for a liturgical day, a Catholic calendar can be consulted.
- 2 The daily Mass readings from the Lectionary for Mass are listed. The reader is urged to review them by reading them from his or her Bible before continuing. If this book is being used for family devotion, various members of the family can take turns reading the assigned passages. For Sundays with readings for Cycles A, B, and C, keep in mind that the new liturgical year begins with the first Sunday of Advent. Church Year 2015 (Advent 2014) uses Cycle B. Cycle C begins with Advent 2015, Cycle A with Advent 2016, and so on.
- 3 A verse from a traditional hymn or religious carol is presented. All the lyrics of the hymns and carols used are in the public domain. If the reader knows the music for the hymn or carol, he or she is encouraged to sing it or hum it to himself or herself or to sing it as a family.
- 4 A reflection follows. The reflection is based on the biblical texts and the verse from the carol or hymn in the context of the liturgical seasons of Advent or Christmas. The individual may read the reflection, or one person of a family may read it aloud for others.
- 5 Throughout the reflections I use the masculine pronoun for God, Lord, Lord God, etc. I am well aware that God is neither male nor female, but to avoid the repetition of nouns over and over again, I employ male pronouns, as they are also used throughout most biblical translations.
- 6 The reflection is followed by a question for personal meditation. The question functions as a guide for personal appropriation of the message of the reflection, and, hopefully, leads the reader into deeper prayer. After a few minutes of reflection, family members may want to share their thoughts about the question.
- 7 A prayer concludes the exercise and summarizes the theme explored in the reflection and will serve as the foundation for the meditation. One member of a family may say the prayer for all, or all may proclaim the prayer together.

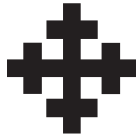
Every year the Advent and Christmas seasons look a little different, so it should be noted that every entry presented here will not always be used. When the Advent season is shortened (because Christmas is early in the week), the Christmas season is lengthened. When the Advent season occupies all four weeks (and Christmas falls on Sunday), the Christmas season is shortened. Thus, not all of the entries for the third week of Advent will normally be used. At least one, and usually several, of the entries for January 2 through January 7 will be omitted because the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord will be celebrated on the Sunday between January 2 and January 8. Some, and in a few years all, of the entries following January 8 will be omitted because the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is marked on the Monday after Epiphany instead of on the following Sunday. The best way to know which entry to use is to follow a Catholic calendar.

It is my hope that these entries will enable you to carol your way through Advent and Christmas and come to both a deeper relationship with God and a renewed appreciation for these weeks of the liturgical year.

Fr. Mark G. Boyer

Section I:

First Week of Advent



On Sundays during Advent and Christmas there will be three reflections to accompany the yearly cycles as noted in the introduction. Choose the reflection that accompanies the current year's readings: Cycle A, B, or C.

First Sunday of Advent, *Cycle A*

Scriptures: Isaiah 2:1–5; Romans 13:11–14;
Matthew 24:37–44

Hymn

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and ev'ry where;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.
Down in a lowly manger
The humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn.*

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” verse 4

Reflection

“Go, tell it on the mountain” is our song on this first Sunday of Advent. Isaiah records his vision of the mountain of the Lord’s house being established as the highest mountain and all people streaming toward Jerusalem to enjoy the everlasting peace of God’s kingdom. Paul tells the Romans, salvation is nearer today than when we first believed. Every day that passes brings us closer to the day of Christ’s return in glory. We look back to his birth in a lowly manger on Christmas morning even as we look forward to the fullness of salvation when he comes again.

The first two weeks of Advent are focused on preparing ourselves for the Lord’s Second Coming. Jesus makes clear in Matthew’s Gospel that his arrival will be unexpected, like a thief in the night. As Noah prepared for the flood, we

should prepare for Christ's return in glory. While we may question when that day will arrive, during Advent we stand together united in hope to prepare for that day. When the Son of Man comes, those who are prepared will be taken and the unprepared will be left.

During the solemn Advent season, we stop and take inventory of our lives so that we can be prepared for Christ's return in glory. We want to examine our daily prayer rituals to be sure that they have not become routine. We want to pay attention to how well we are living our baptismal promises, renouncing evil, and professing our faith in our triune God. Advent preparation includes less rushing around and more quiet reflection—a stark contrast to our cultural Christmas frenzy. ✚

Meditation

*Of the following, which one is your favorite
Advent metaphor: mountain climbing, light vs.
darkness, prepared vs. unprepared? Explain.*

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus, and do not delay. Grant us the help of the Holy Spirit so that we may be dressed in the armor of light so that at your coming we may enter your kingdom, where you live with the Father and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

First Sunday of Advent, *Cycle B*

Scriptures: Isaiah 63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7; 1
Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:33–37

Hymn

*Creator of the stars of night,
Your people's everlasting light,
Jesus, Redeemer, save us all,
And hear your servants when they call.*

“Creator of the Stars of Night,” verse 1

Reflection

This first Sunday of Advent should find us watching for Christ's return in glory. Repeatedly, Jesus commands his disciples in Mark's Gospel to watch, be alert, stay awake; he may come early in the morning, at midday, in the afternoon, in the evening, at midnight. Whatever spiritual gifts God has given to us should be employed to shape us like a potter molds clay in awaiting the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, writes St. Paul.

Isaiah calls on the creator of the stars, the Lord, to tear the heavens open and come to earth with the mountains quaking before him. The prophet asks this of God so that the people might be saved. The deeds of the Holy One in the past are nothing compared to what is expected in the future when the Lord Jesus Christ will come in glory. No ear has heard the story of what is to come. No eye has seen any God except the Lord preparing his people for the day of his Son's Second Coming.

Stand on tiptoe and look over the windowsill. What imminent expectation do you see? The earth has quietly fallen asleep, yet life is stirring in root and bulb underground. Furry wild animals scurry through yards and trees, expecting to find nuts and berries to satisfy their winter hunger. And people, too, are alert to the weather forecast, especially if it might include ice, snow, or freezing rain. ✚

Meditation

What spiritual gift most molds you into Advent waiting?

Prayer

Father, creator of the stars of night, you are our everlasting light. Keep us watchful and alert for our Redeemer's coming in glory. Hear your servants' call through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen.

First Sunday of Advent, *Cycle C*

Scriptures: Jeremiah 33:14–16; 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2; Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

Hymn

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of ev'ry longing heart.*

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," verse 1

Reflection

Today, the Church begins a period of longing for Christ's return in glory. The first two weeks of Advent do not focus on Jesus' birth in Bethlehem; rather, they are focused on his Second Coming. The first verse of "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" expresses this desire well, as does St. Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians, urging the Thessalonians to be found holy—in a healthy relationship with God—when Jesus returns.

Jeremiah looks forward to a day when God would raise up a descendant of King David, who would set the people free from fears of foreign domination and, thus, be Israel's hope and consolation. And the Lukan Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the one for whom Jeremiah hoped,

urges vigilance for his return in a cloud with great power and glory. During Advent, the hope of the earth and of every nation becomes flesh in those who keep this longing in their hearts. Their joy is tangible as, in the words of the Mass, they await the blessed hope and the coming of their Savior, Jesus Christ.

We hear words about waiting for Christ's return in glory during every Mass. Phrases like "until you [, Lord,] come again," "we look forward to his second coming," "we await his coming in glory," and "looking forward to his blessed Coming" become very familiar. Thinking about them may awaken in us some Advent reflection. ✙

Meditation

In what specific ways do you await the return of Christ in glory?

Prayer

Come, long-expected Jesus, and set us free from fears and sin. Let our longing hearts find rest in you, who are Lord forever and ever. Amen.

Monday of the First Week of Advent

Scriptures:

Year A: Isaiah 4:2–6; Matthew 8:5–11

Years B & C: Isaiah 2:1–5; Matthew 8:5–11

Hymn

*To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let your light restore
Earth's own true loveliness once more.*

“On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry,” verse 4

Reflection

The Matthean Jesus demonstrates that God’s kingdom has come to the earth by healing the Gentile centurion’s paralyzed servant because of his master’s faith. By stretching out his hand and healing the sick, Jesus fulfills Isaiah’s vision of nations streaming to the Lord’s mountain. The suffering servant’s light is restored. Indeed, a small part of earth’s true loveliness is re-created by Jesus.

We don’t have to be doctors to bring healing into the world. Greeting a fellow traveler on the bus, train, or subway can soothe a morning that has not gone according to human plans.

Visiting the elderly in nursing homes and bringing them the Eucharist can be a healing touch. Picking up the stray paper dancing in the wind on the sidewalk can heal the earth. Like the Roman centurion, no one is worthy to have

Jesus enter his home, but we can bring him to those who need him most. With the Roman centurion, we Catholics declare our faith at every Mass, saying, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” ✚

Meditation

In what specific ways do you manifest the kingdom of God by restoring a small part of earth's loveliness?

Prayer

Stretch out your hand, O God, and heal the sick and bid the fallen sinner stand. In us, shine forth your kingdom, and let your light shine forth, restoring earth's true loveliness. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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Sometime in November, or commonly as early as October, Christmas songs are heard in shopping malls, in discount stores, on the radio, on TV, and through all manner of electronic devices. The secular form of Christmas is characterized by its own music, just like the religious seasons of Advent and Christmas have their own hymns and carols. Revisit these tunes and focus your faith this year with reflections that connect the daily Advent and Christmas readings from the Lectionary to religious hymns and carols sung throughout the season. Unlike any other Advent devotional you've ever read, this book unites our preparations and celebrations with a faith as old as song.

Mark G. Boyer has served the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, MO, as a priest for nearly forty years, during which he was an editor of the award-winning diocesan newspaper, *The Mirror*, for fourteen years. Currently, he directs the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Springfield. Fr. Boyer is the author of more than forty books on biblical and liturgical spirituality, and he is also a religious studies instructor at Missouri State University, Springfield, teaching courses that explore connections between Scripture and modern film. He has multiple degrees, including an M.Div. from St. Meinrad School of Theology, an M.A. in Religious Studies from Indiana University, and a master's in religious education from Loyola University, New Orleans, among others.

Advent / Christmas

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