



# RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

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## ADVENT

Waiting in darkness,  
 waiting in stillness,  
 waiting in gentle anticipation.  
 Light is on the way.  
 The time of tribulation  
 Is nearly over.  
 Jesus is coming.  
 Into the world, waking from  
 The depths of the soul.

*... and protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.*

As we celebrate the liturgical season of Advent, we are called upon to reflect on the basic human activity of waiting. How do we wait? Do we wait in anxiety and fear or with hope, and even joy? Is that incompleteness of which waiting is always a manifestation, a source of fear and frustration or of hope and joy?

For many of us, the Season of Advent is the part of the Church year that seems the most attuned to our day to day lives. So much of our life experience involves waiting, a sense of incompleteness and anticipation for that which we long for and yet do not experience. At each moment, as we live our present and think about and envision our future, what disposition is more ascendant in our mind and heart: love or fear? The truth is that nothing we build lasts and none of our thoughts or plans is ever totally realized. Everything and everyone that we value and try to hold on to passes. The diminishment and loss of everything we value is for us one of our greatest sufferings. And so, we try with all our might to hold on. The tighter we hold, however, the more fearful we become. Our attempt to avoid anxiety and fear becomes, paradoxically, the source of yet greater fear and anxiety. The Season of Advent, coming in the northern hemisphere at the time of increasing darkness, affords an invitation to face our anxiety and fear, to compassionately attend to the thoughts, feelings and desires that we busily and frantically attempt through most of the year to avoid. As the theologian Paul Tillich has asserted: "Absolute

Faith, the state of being grasped by God beyond God, is always a movement in, with, and under other states of mind." The call of Advent is to make a space for God to come to us, not besides our suffering states of mind but "in, with, and under" them.

The great 5th century Church Father Peter Chrysologus sees the great events of Israel's history (Noah and the flood, the call of Abram, Jacob's dream, the call of Moses) through the following lens: "When God saw the world falling to ruin because of fear, he immediately acted to call it back to himself with love." The waiting of Advent reminds us that much of our activity and the violence it contains are based in fear. Remember how, as children, when we would have to wait for a much desired and anticipated occurrence the experience would be excruciating. Time would seem to stand almost still and our agitation would increase by the minute. The words of our parents, "Be still. Be patient." would only strengthen our need to get moving, and often to get into trouble. We were learning very early on the limits of our power to make happen what we most need and want. For our whole lives, this remains an affront to us, and so, too much of our fear-filled action and reaction results in dissonance rather than consonance with God's way. Yet, as Peter Chrysologus tells us, God is always acting to call us "back to himself with love." We attune ourselves to that loving action by learning to wait both anxiously but also in love and joyful hope.

The great prophetic voice of the Advent Liturgy is Isaiah. Isaiah reminds God's people that even as they live in the weariness of exile, the Lord is coming to save them.

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The Lord gives strength to the wearied,  
the Lord strengthens the powerless.  
The young may grow tired and weary,  
youths may stumble,  
but those who hope in the Lord renew their  
strength,  
they put out wings like eagles.  
They run and do not grow weary,  
walk and never tire. (Is. 40, 29-31)

The people of Israel suffering their long exile in Babylon feel, like many of us often in life, that there is no connection between their life and destiny and the Lord. But Isaiah is reminding them that in fact it is in their very weariness and powerlessness that the Lord is coming to strengthen them. And in this, Isaiah teaches us the true nature of hope and courage. We can become agitated in our fear and discouragement and move away from our heart – in despair or in frantic activity. Or, we can remain connected with our heart's desire and begin to discover the deeper dimensions of courage and hope, the "absolute faith" that moves us "in, with, and under" our own fear and anxiety.

Psalm 103 tells us that if we continue to bless the Lord in our inmost being (by remaining with the Lord within even in our fear and discouragement) our youth will be renewed "like the eagle." In his new translation and commentary on the Psalms, Robert Alter points out that "this image alludes to the eagle's shedding its feathers and growing new ones." However weary and diminished all the states of mind and of life make us, at the depth of our being the Lord is always renewing our youth. In Luke 10:21 Jesus thanks his Father for revealing "to mere children" what "he has hidden from the learned and the clever." Contemporary developmental psychology speaks often of the "resilience" of children. Children remain open to the new possibilities of the moment, often despite the experiences of the past. At the deepest place of our being, at the place of our union with the Lord, we remain trusting and hopeful and so open to the newness of the moment. "From the bottom of our hearts" we are always shedding the old feathers that we've grown out of our fear and disappointments, and growing new and youthful ones. And this is possible because, deep under the surface of things, God's advent is always occurring. That for which we long and so often dare not acknowledge is always coming to us. Our feathers are always molting, for what we have built in fear is always falling to ruin and God is always "calling us back to himself in love."

In the same sermon quoted earlier, Peter Chrysologus writes: "It is intolerable for love not to see the

object of its longing." In fact, isn't it disappointment that we most fear? Isn't our greatest anxiety that we feel that we can't bear the fact that our hopes, our aspirations, our ideals have not and cannot be realized? Do our lives, does our faith, threaten to become love-less because we find it intolerable to bear the longing of our love and desire? Advent and Christmas is a call to make a space in our consciousness for the depth of our own heart and so for the Lord who, as he tells Zaccheus, must come to our house. (Lk. 19,5)

But as we see in the Psalm, while we are in "straits," Yah (the Lord) answers "in a wide-open place." The place where the Lord abides, however, is a place of possibility and hope. The truth is that things are not as they seem from our closed-in perspective. "The Lord is for me, I shall not fear," says the next verse, "what can humankind do to me?" This verse of the psalm describes a change in consciousness, a change in heart, from "the straits" to "a wide-open place." When we look for the Lord to free us and have mercy on us within the straits of our reactive and habitual consciousness, we are too "constrained" to recognize the love, mercy, and possibility of the Lord that resides "in a wide-open space." The love is there, but when we are constricted by our repetitive memories we can't recognize it. It is in "going out" from these "straits" that we can recognize, even within our distress, possibilities for love, care, and mercy that had been hidden from us.

"She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn." (Lk. 2,7) God is always coming in Jesus, but there must be a space. How do we make such a space in our own hearts? We do this by allowing and acknowledging all the states of mind that would close us down in anxiety and fear. In this space where we are weary and tired, where we stumble and fall the Lord is always beckoning to us. It is this space in the depths of our own hearts where, in the words of Peter Chrysologus, God is "inviting us by his grace, preserving us by his love, and embracing us with compassion."



## THE HEALING OF THE TEN LEPERS

~ Fr. James F. Morris

“One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.” We are all familiar with this cliché. No doubt, we are also familiar with the ways it has played out in our own lives and in our homes. There are, for example, stories of parishioners who have brought boxes of unused items to donate for the “White Elephant” tables at the annual Parish Fair. This discarded trash from our homes often becomes part of the treasure with which our customers leave the hall when they visit our fair in November. While the items may not bring in large sums of money for the church, they do provide entertainment as folks look over the items being offered and often discover something they need, want, or can actually use; sometimes for a dollar or less! One of our parishioners has a particular eye for used coffee mugs. One year, he actually bought back a mug, which his spouse had donated! Sometimes the cliché hits close to home when we realize that one member of the household is desperately trying to organize, clean out, recycle and pitch out; while the other is attempting to hold on to “perfectly good stuff!”

Eighteen years ago, when our family moved into our house, I recall cleaning some unused “trash” out of the basement. The children and I lined the items up on the curb on Sunday afternoon for the Monday morning trash collection. As the sun was going down, I looked out the front window to find Joy arriving home from walking 20 miles in the Boston Walk for Hunger. Although very tired, she was picking through the trash and salvaging the treasures we had, inadvertently, of course, thrown away! We were destined to travel to the new house with those items. I’m sure some of them have lived in the attic to this day!

We can all relate to these and other anecdotes about miscellaneous boxes and freestanding pieces which reside in our basements, attics, closets, cupboards, and garages. What does all of this have to do with today’s Gospel, and with the Advent Season, or the St. Philip Fast, as we Byzantine Christians call it? In what way might it connect with today’s feast of St. Nicholas?

The stories describe holding on and letting go. We all carry around memories. Some memories make us grateful. They involve people in our lives and ways that those people have touched our hearts, helped us, taught us, provided for us, or contributed to our formation by giving of themselves to us; indeed, by loving us. Some memories are of the blessings in our lives: the gifts God has bestowed upon us, the opportunities we have had to study, to work, to serve others, to care for others. They are the memories that never cease to

bring us happiness and peace. They are the treasured memories of our parents, our children, our grandchildren, and of our dearest and oldest friends. They form, in part, the history of our families and our lives. They are the memories we weave into stories and share around the table. It is never a burden to carry these kinds of memories. They make us happy. They always lift our spirits.

Other memories make us sad or trigger negative emotions such as annoyance, hostility, anger, or even a deeply felt hurt or pain. They may have to do with times that we have suffered because of the actions of another. We lament our suffering and blame the person we perceive as responsible for it. We sometimes repeat this process over and over! Not satisfied with just remembering, we hold on to the hurt. The anger festers. It becomes a heavier burden. We revisit and ruminate. Sometimes we hold onto these burdensome memories of hurt and suffering for decades of our life, even into old age. At a time in our lives when we need to be cleaning house, getting rid of unnecessary trash, we hold on and create clutter and complicate life. We create emotional weights around our hearts. Gratitude and appreciation get pushed aside and God’s grace is blocked just like a blocked artery to the heart!

Today’s Gospel presents us with a wonderful lesson and reminder about gratitude. Jesus had compassion on those who were suffering the pain and the isolation of the disease of leprosy. They shouted to him from afar, for they were not permitted to approach anyone who was otherwise ritually clean. Even from a distance, the lepers experienced the compassionate presence and words of Jesus as healing. Ten were made whole, yet only one returned to thank Jesus and give praise to God. One man let go of the pain, which he felt from years of suffering with the disease. One man truly opened his heart and received the healing as God’s gift! He left his burden behind. He let go of the painful memories, which he did not need, in order to receive the joy of the moment. One man knew he was loved by God and responded with thanks and praise.

If we give attention to the spiritual journey of Advent, then we, too, might be able to let go of some unnecessary clutter in our lives. We can make a choice to spend a bit of time this Advent doing some cleaning out. We can let go of some of our painful past. We can stop holding on to the hostile feelings we have toward coworkers, family members, or estranged friends. We can unburden ourselves. We can choose to finally stop holding a grudge. We can even forgive someone who has never asked for our forgiveness! We can hold on or we can let go, the choice is ours.

We began the Advent Fasting period forty days from Christmas Eve on the feast of St. Philip. We have found the theme of gratitude at every turn. We paused to be with our families and express gratitude for God's abundant Blessings on Thanksgiving. Today, we celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas. We take time to enjoy the company of our parish family in honor of this Beloved Saint of the Ukrainian Church both at Liturgy today, as well as at the St. Nicholas Dinner to follow. Once again, hope for a visit from the Venerable Bishop of Myra himself! He has a way of reminding us every year that St. John's Parish and God loves us! This day, too, is a day of gratitude!

Tomorrow, we continue our Advent journey. We know our destination to be a cave in the town of Bethlehem in Judea. There we will look for a newborn child who is laid to rest in a manger filled with hay. It is not a journey for those who are heavily burdened. May God's grace help us to travel light. Let us take the time each day to remember the journey and what it is all about. May we find ways to help each other. We are all

fellow travelers! May we have the wisdom to understand how important it is to let go of the unnecessary weight of bitter memories and angry thoughts, and may God help us take the time and make the space we need for prayer and reflection. Let us remember the words of the Eucharistic prayer from the Liturgy: "We thank you for. . . the blessings bestowed upon us both manifest and hidden." May we drink not only from the Chalice of Salvation in the Eucharist, but also from the thirst quenching and ever-flowing waters of gratitude and, thereby, find ourselves with open hearts ready to receive the gift which awaits us at our destination!

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

We are very grateful to Father James Morris for sharing his homiletic reflections on the Gospel reading (Lk 17:11-19) from the Byzantine Lectionary for the 29th Sunday After Pentecost and the Feast of Saint Nicholas. Father James F. Morris is Pastor of St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church in Salem, Massachusetts.

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