



*St. Jude's Church
Stony Hill*

*Our Hope and Expectation
Daily Reflections for Advent & Christmas 2021*

**The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C
19 December 2021**

Free expert deep-cleaning service

The Collect: Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by Your daily visitation, that Your Son Jesus Christ, at His coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for Himself; who lives and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Reflection: If today were before March 2020, with the frantic yuletide activities and just five shopping days to Christmas, would it not be difficult to bear in mind the penitential tone of this fourth week of Advent? Thankful then, for restrictions, no-movements, distancing and a generally slower pace, we isolate from manic materialism and turn the spotlight inward. This week provides an opportunity to get to know ourselves, to be more acutely aware of the moral principles to which we should be committed.

We decelerate to examine the conscience, "...the inner voice that warns us that someone might be looking", that judges right from wrong by God's moral standards, and governs our conduct, intentions, character, thoughts and actions. It has been said that "conscience is like a watch. It serves a useful purpose, but only if properly set." If set incorrectly, if we confuse the good with the bad, if our conscience is impure, we will be led off -path and could become irretrievably lost.

During this season, as we prepare for Christ's visitation, we recall that, in spite of generations of prophetic forth telling, there was no earthly mansion prepared for His first coming. He visits us still in countless situations in our daily interactions: today as we prepare to receive the Sacrament, as we hear the Word proclaimed, and together, pray this Collect. We yearn to be ready for His Second Coming, "to be with the Lord forever", but the Beatitudes remind us that it is the pure in heart who "...shall see God" and Paul encourages purified consciences because "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Romans 1:17).

Today, our Lord is calling our consciences into question, and we rejoice that, on our submission, He will lovingly deep-clean/and purify them.

Meditation: In what ways is God asking me to make a radical change as an individual, as a participant in my faith community, and as a member of society? How can I make my heart, my life, to be a mansion prepared for my Saviour?

Prayer: God of love, "Direct, control, suggest this day, All I design or do or say; That all my powers, with all their might, In Thy sole glory may unite." (Hymns Ancient & Modern #3, verse 7)

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**Monday of the Fourth Week of Advent, Year C
20 December 2021**

Love rebuilds, repairs, restores

Reading: Micah 5: 2 – 5a

Scripture: "... they shall live secure" (Micah 5: 4b, 5a)

Reflection: Today, as we reflect on this, the most well-known passage of Micah, the promised security appears to be only an unattainable utopia. With national and personal life already reeling from the effects of the pandemic, in recent weeks our nation was clobbered by unwelcomed news from the East of bewildering onslaughts on children, preceding acts of the terrified avenging jungle justice and, within hours, we were assailed from the West, by the insanity of a gruesome "ark-boarding ritual" culminating in bizarre "Bloody Hell". How can we ever "live secure"?

Micah's contemporaries were in an even more hopeless situation. Declared God's chosen people, they had become a fragmented community in a hostile, unfamiliar environment. Their cultural and political identity collapsed, they were suffering countless injustices, witnessing an ever-increasing chasm between rich and poor, gross injustice with no recourse to the courts, and living a religious life

that demonstrated no depth or reality. To a nation under siege by Nebuchadnezzar's mighty armies, Micah, speaking from outside the established social and political structure, urges a vulnerable, disheartened people to defend itself, marshal its troops: an exercise in futility; a quixotic pipe-dream.

The bane of Micah's prophecy is reassurance based on the relationship of love, security and fellowship, between Israel, her God and the Messiah from eternity throughout time. Just as labour ends and birth happens, present crisis will be followed by future deliverance, hostile powers subdued, the nation united, restored and peace and serenity become the order of the day.

The God of 8th century Israel, the sovereign God of Jamaica in 2021, remains committed to nourishing and protecting His beloved people. Therefore, with hope for future restoration to peace and security, we confidently declare, **"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ... struck down, but not destroyed..."** (2 Corinthians 4:9)

Meditation: Love, occasioning justice, unity and peace, is the hope of every Christmas. In spite of current distractions, it is the hope of this nation for this Christmas. What can I contribute to make this sphere in which I live and move, a centre of justice, peace and love?

Prayer: "O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight." (CPWI Hymnal #48, verse 3)

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**Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Advent, Year C
21 December 2021**

Dancing through tears

Reading: Psalm 80:1-7

Scripture: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." (Psalm 80:3)

Reflection: The worshiping community chants this Psalm on Advent 4 two of three times in the 3-year cycle, and, in total, uses different sections for the Eucharistic Lectionary, just one time less often than even Psalm 23. It seems strange, almost paradoxical, that just before the Christmas exhilaration peaks, the Church directs the devout to lament; "Thou hast fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure."

Psalm 80 was originally the lament of exiled Israel under the fierce discipline of the hostile Assyrians. They were afflicted, humiliated and ridiculed but they refused to 'lie down and play dead'. They fought back. Bitter, repentant wailing accompanied their incessant supplication to the Shepherd Ruler of Israel to "forgive and restore - make his face to shine... be gracious...lift up his countenance...and give ... peace."

This Psalm expresses the plight of modern-day persons more numerous and closer to us than we may realise. A well-masked broken heart in the adjoining office, someone grieving beside us in the pews; a distraught classmate, a disillusioned friend or critically ill family member at this very moment could be feeling "ravaged, burned, and cut down". Loneliness, anxiety, grief, insecurity of employment and transient relationships heighten the need for the protection, pardon, and peace that only the Shepherd of Israel offers. Practically, mental health issues emerge as we ignore or minimize the symptoms exhibited by a brother/sister in Christ - displays of inexplicable sadness, reduced ability to concentrate, mood changes, alienation from friends and withdrawal from regular activities.

To love all His creation and display restorative concern for the afflicted is the challenge we accept as we join in solidarity with others praying, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

Meditation: Confident that Advent hope is the "mature, seasoned hope of a community aware of its shortcomings, scarred and repentant, but pointing in anticipation to the Incarnation", look back to the difficult seasons when you also were "fed ... with the bread of tears" and be grateful that you, too, experienced the steadfast, faithful, restoring love - sign of the uniqueness of Israel's God and ours!

Prayer: "When Thou shalt revive us, Thy name we will praise, And nevermore, turning, depart from Thy ways; O Lord God Almighty, In mercy restore, And we shall be saved when Thy face shines once more ". (Adoniram J. Gordon: Longing for Revival, The Trinity Psalter #221, verse3)

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**Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Advent, Year C
22 December 2021**

The only true cure

Reading: Hebrews 10: 5 - 10

Scripture: "See, I have come to do your will." (Hebrews 10:9)

Reflection: Through the ages, many voices have admonished His people that nothing but obedience can open the way to God. Psalmists and prophets, including Samuel, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, consistently warned the Israelites against slavishly accepting the Levitical prescription of animal sacrifice as an antidote for sin and access to God.

My generation was taught (with painful disciplinary slaps) that, "To obey is better than sacrifice..." but, in this age we learn that "obedience" does not fit in well with individualism: not with human rights, gender equality, with children's rights, the right to privacy, freedom of belief, religion or expression. Obedience (as in the marriage vows) connotes "subservience and submission" today's society pontificates.

Quoting from Psalm 40:6, however, the writer to the Hebrews appropriately uses the word as "to listen to," "to hear." The passage tells us that what God desires most of all is not

performance of ritual, as important as that may be, but willingness to listen to Him and do His will.

With its compulsory offering of burnt sacrifice for absolution from sin, the Old Covenant has been declared obsolete with Jesus' performing a total changing of the guard ushering in a new era of salvation. He effectively and decisively fulfilled all the aims and intentions of the former covenant by His perfect, complete and sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice.

Modern-day Christians read the Bible and shake our heads in consternation at the denseness, the mental and spiritual incapacity of refusing to comprehend Christ's redeeming love for humanity demonstrated by replacing burnt offerings with the unique, selfless offering of His own life. But is our own worship perfunctory ritual, or does it fulfil the intended purpose of keeping us "in remembrance" of the supreme sacrifice that erased our sin and brought us into close relationship with God?

Meditation: How much of our private lives, our communal worship, consists of performing and clinging to rituals while neglecting key spiritual activity: obedience to God's will? Beginning this Christmas, I give myself the gift of striving to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Prayer: Father, too often I concentrate on the outward form of worship. Open my eyes to my shortcomings, fill my heart that I might mature in grace, and so relate more closely to You. **Amen.**

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**Thursday of the Fourth Week of Advent, Year C
23 December 2021**

Senior saints: loved and liberated

Reading: Luke 1: 39 - 45

Scripture: "...this is the sixth month with her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:36b, 37)

Reflection: Pregnant with promise of new life conceived by God's liberating love, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth demonstrate His imprint on ordinary folk who, despite overpowering challenges, remain open and obedient to His promptings, thereby incorporating their story into the big picture that becomes His story.

Years of disappointing childlessness have taken a toll on the faith of this devout, elderly couple until God lovingly intervenes, releases Zechariah from the crippling implication of divine displeasure and ushers into his priestly ministry a new era of praise and joy.

Elizabeth's unexpected pregnancy secures maternal fulfillment, liberates her from social stigma – the "disgrace I have endured among my people" - fashions her into a divine instrument in God's salvific plan and creates a fitting confidante for her young relative assigned a herculean responsibility. Elizabeth's reassurance of " ... a fulfillment of what was spoken ... by the Lord." must have been

as encouraging to Mary as John's *in utero* start to his prophetic mission of heralding the yet-unborn Messiah.

So here **we** are - senior saints having walked a lifetime "in the way" – serving God faithfully and humanity sacrificially. Yet life is only a maelstrom of overwhelming stressors: unfulfilled dreams, lifelong "put-downs" that generate demoralizing feelings of inferiority. We know that God applauds our consistent righteousness and is aware of our secret struggles with the dastardly hand life has dealt despite our efforts and through no fault of our own. Zechariah and Elizabeth bring encouragement. Still pray in anticipation!

Though years are passing, and myriad inaccessible opportunities have evaporated, even now, nothing is impossible with God. May ours not be the situation that sets the stage for the kingdom of God to break into our lives and through our steadfastness flood the lives of others with encouragement, revival, love and liberation.

Meditation: Repeatedly we ask God to take away some enduring pain and use us for His purpose in an outstanding way. Will we eventually despair and grow cynical to buttress ourselves against disappointment? Can we remain faithful through a life of preparation, knowing that, although God's activity is seemingly slow in coming, we will ultimately make a difference?

Prayer: "Lord Jesus, when my body fails and inner demons bar the way to hope, when drear depression pulls me down, then give my struggling spirit strength to cope, that, trustful in the good, I see God's hand in things I do not understand". (Lord Jesus, when my courage fails, verse 2, by Shirley Erena Murray, #29 in Hymns in Times of Crisis, The Hymn Society)

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**Friday of the Fourth Week of Advent, Year C
24 December 2021**

Two different worlds

Reading: Luke 1: 39-45, 46 -55

Scripture: "...Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." Luke 1:39-40)

Reflection: The stories of two women, both promised a child, dominate the closing days of Advent. Mary and Elizabeth represent the best of Old Testament piety and their child-bearing involves intervention by God. Elizabeth receives the miraculous news from her ageing husband instructed to name the child John, meaning "God is gracious": indicating his life's role. It is Gabriel who speaks directly to Mary, alone, unmarried, a young, naive peasant girl. She is notified of her son's unending greatness in line with the promise to His ancestor David. Elizabeth rejoices. The news dispels dark shadows of "disgrace" for her and for Mary, and although the announced participation in God's purpose spells calamity, scandal and ostracism, she responds with humble acceptance.

We cannot help but wonder how modern-day relatives would have acted in a similar situation. Basking in the joy of newly-discovered pregnancy, our 2021 Elizabeth could have become inhospitably annoyed at young Mary's unannounced intrusion and prolonged stay. Both are pregnant but Elizabeth, matronly wife, is "respectably" so. She could have considered that, on the basis of seniority, community and church position, an assignment as phenomenal as Mary's should, more appropriately, have been afforded her, spouse of a devout, long-serving priest. And Mary? Indoctrinated by modernity with all its negative effects, today's teenaged mom-to-be would rather take to Facebook than visit Elizabeth. She confides to her 'peeps': "The old lady will never believe me/ will condemn me/will only seek to dictate my life."

In contrast, Elizabeth greets the young lady ecstatically and loudly proclaims her "Blessed...among women". Both choose the humility that divine and familial love inspires. Each, by giving a listening ear, understanding heart, respect, companionship and encouragement exult in the wonders of God and anticipate the significant difference their offspring will make to the world.

Meditation: Intergenerational differences give rise to prejudices and conflict that stymie progress in our families, churches and society. In what ways are you, Generation X, Y, Baby Boomer or Traditionalist, reaching out to embrace older/younger persons to share the love of God and contribute meaningfully to community building?

Prayer: "You sent us Jesus, Who prayed for His own: 'Make them all one so Your love will be known.' Making new friends, may we understand we are love's bearers throughout every land". (Carolyn Winfrey Gillette).

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**The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ: Christmas Day
Saturday, 25 December**

Filled with good things

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2: 1-20; Psalm 96

Scripture: "O sing to the Lord a new song..." (Psalm 96:1)

Reflection: The towering events of history sometimes spring from barely visible roots. The mighty acts of God begin unobtrusively, in seemingly insignificant places, with humble people. So, the Christmas story begins – the coming of the "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace", of Love Divine excelling all loves, shining through the darkness to rescue mankind from all that threatens to diminish or destroy.

Isaiah predicts to tiny, impotent Judah facing devastation by mighty Assyria, transformation from depression and fear. God will provide Davidic leadership to take the nation from gloom and darkness to exultation. The famine earth will provide sustenance from unbounded joy of harvest. Wholeness and well-being will replace present sorrow and scarcity.

Announcement of the "new-born king", Jesus, does not echo down the corridors of the wealthy and powerful Roman Emperor

Augustus, nor through the palace of Roman-Syrian Governor Quirinius, but is first shared with the "great unwashed masses". These shepherds, unkempt, disregarded peasants at the bottom of the scale of power and privilege, lacking any hope of acceptability, separated from the regular life of society, are the ones to go "glorifying and praising God...". proclaiming Immanuel.

Joseph, with Mary in an advanced state of pregnancy, complying with a political order, travel to Bethlehem. Impoverished itinerants, they find welcome only in the door-less stable of a world engrossed with finding salvation by way of its own efforts. The birth of the Saviour occurs in ordinariness and dirt similar to that in which the shepherds work; and Mary's new-born baby, helpless and vulnerable, lacking a cradle, is put in a feeding trough and kept warm by strips of cloth. Through God's "...lifting up the lowly and...filling the hungry...", all mankind secures access to the richness of God.

Meditation: The places and events that create history are not initially significant or dramatic; nor are the acts of God. The Lord appeared to Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds when they were just being themselves - serving in ordinary, day-to-day ways. What does that imply about what it means to be 'spiritual'? How is God speaking to you in the ordinary flow of life?

Prayer: Surprising God, You make Your presence known in unexpected ways...Meet us here today and open our hearts to recognize You in our midst, calling us to live into Your new thing: a world where Your love takes shape in justice and peace...**Amen.**
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25 December 2021