

# Let Advent be a time of hope, healing

Happy New Year! You might think me a month too early, but Advent is the beginning of a new liturgical year in the church, a time of new beginnings and focus on the hope that underlines our faith as Roman Catholics. This is a time when we not only commemorate our Savior's birth two millennia ago, but also focus eagerly on the Second Advent, the New Jerusalem, that will erase forever the struggles of this world.

In a time of war, when the tragedy of violence seems to suffocate us and we are filled with uncertainty, let Advent and its promise fill your hearts with joyful hope. Let it remind you of the words of the great prophet, Isaiah, who not only foretold the coming of the "wonderful Counselor, Prince of Peace," but also promised that God will come to "swallow up death forever" and "wipe away the tears from all faces."

Indeed, the whole story of Christmas, of the coming of the Christ, is one of fear and dread transformed into absolute joy.

Imagine the frustration, even anger, of Joseph, whom St. Matthew tells us discovers that his intended wife, Mary, was bearing a child "before they lived together." A good and



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## Along the Way

sensitive man, he planned to dismiss Mary quietly until the Lord's own angel came to him in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid." And Joseph took God at God's word, believed the Promise, and loved and cared for Mary and Jesus his whole life.

Imagine this young, innocent Mary, whom Luke tells us was suddenly visited by the Angel Gabriel with the words, "Greetings, favored one!" We are simply told she is "much perplexed by his words" but think how absolutely terrified she must have been! Then the kind angel, recognizing her fear, said, "Do not be afraid." And Mary overcame her trepidation and embraced God's request with the words "Here am I,

the servant of the Lord ... and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Consider the shepherds, keeping watch in what must have been dark and lonely fields. What must their faces have looked like when the angel appeared in the brilliance of God's glory? "Do not be afraid," the angel said. "I bring you good news of great joy." And the shepherds somehow overcame their fear, believed the angel and their God, journeyed to see the Christ child, and left "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

For all of us, too, the story of Christmas and the meaning of Advent really are about trusting God. They are about letting God's love and grace fill us with a treasure far more valuable than even the famous first Christmas presents of "gold, frankincense and myrrh."

When we open our hearts to anticipation and joy, like a gleeful child running toward the glowing tree on Christmas morning, we are filled with hope and a sense that all will indeed be well. And we, like Joseph, Mary and the shepherds, are no longer afraid.

At the same time, we who share as sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus

in this promise of the "New Heaven and New Earth" foretold in Revelation must take our kinship seriously. Not just at Christmas, but especially in this Season of Light we each must be the light of hope, the earthly angels who bring comfort and joy. We must be the ones who say "do not be afraid" to those who hunger for food or for hope, to those bound to their homes by age or infirmity, to those who mourn for loved ones lost or dreams dashed, to those whose lives have changed as a result of violence here or across the world.

This Advent season, let us fill each other's lives with hope and healing. Let Jesus be born anew in our hearts every morning we wake. Let us reach out a helping hand to those who need us, children and adults alike.

"You, Lord Jesus, born for us at Bethlehem, ask respect for every person, especially for the small and the weak," said Pope John Paul II's 2000 Christmas message as the Christian world ushered in the Third Millennium. "O Christ, whom we look on today in the arms of Mary, You are the reason for our hope!"

Happy Advent, Merry Christmas and peace to all.



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