

★ DAYBREAKS ★

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*Daily Reflections for
Advent and Christmas*

Daily Prayer

*O Wisdom,
Come to teach me the way of truth.*

*O Lord of Israel,
Come to redeem me with an outstretched arm.*

*O Root of Jesse,
Come to bring me new life; do not delay.*

*O Key of David,
Come to open my prison doors and set me free.*

*O Radiant Dawn,
Come to bring light to the darkness in my life.*

*O King of all Nations,
Come to save me and give me peace.*

*O God-With-Us,
Stay with me and send me forth in your name.*

Amen.

O ANTIPHONS, ADAPTED

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Preface

We spend about 98 percent of our lives waiting for something else to happen to us. Only rarely do we find ourselves inside what Henri Nouwen called a *fully pregnant moment*, that is, where we can say to ourselves: “Right now I don’t want to be in any other place, with any other people, or doing anything other than what I am doing right now!” Mostly we are in one situation, with certain people, doing certain things, but are waiting for that to end so that something else or someone else can appear in our lives.

We experience this in many ways: Sometimes we are just waiting for our bus arrive, for our workday to end, or for a cherished friend to visit. But at other times our impatience is deeper and we ache for a new season in our lives, a new person to fall in love with, a more meaningful career, or for the courage to finally face up to a nagging problem. We are always waiting.

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In that sense, we are always in “advent,” a word that comes from the Latin, *Adventus*, meaning, “coming.” We long for someone or something to come along and bring new meaning into our lives. For us, as Christians, we see that new meaning in the coming of Christ.

The season of Advent is a time to get in touch with our longing, our aching, our frustrations. Its crimson color speaks not of penance, but of desire—and, in desire, we can, as the mystics say, enter into the loneliness of God and intuit the Kingdom.



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TORONTO, CANADA
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The Rhythm of Love

Saint John of the Cross, in *The Living Flame of Love*, compares our pre-Advent selves to green logs that have been thrown into a fire, the fire of love. Green logs, as we know, do not immediately burst into flame. Rather, being young and full of moisture, they sizzle for a long time before they reach kindling temperature and take into themselves the fire that is around them. So, too, the rhythm of love: only the really mature can burst into flame within community. The rest of us are still too green, too selfish, too damp.



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What helps change this is precisely the tension in our lives. In carrying properly our unfulfilled desires, we sizzle and slowly let go of the dampness of selfishness. In carrying tension we come to kindling temperature and are made ready for love.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and scientist, noticed that sometimes when you put two chemicals into a test tube they do not automatically unite. They only unite at a higher temperature. They must first be heated to bring about unity. There's an entire anthropology and psychology of love in that image. In order to love we must first be brought to a higher psychic temperature. What brings us there? Sizzling in tension: not resolving the tensions of our lives prematurely; not sleeping with the bride before the wedding.

Advent should not be confused with Lent. The crimson-purple of Advent is not the black-purple of Lent. The former symbolizes yearning and longing, the latter repentance. The spirituality of Advent is about carrying tension without prematurely resolving it so that we do not short-circuit the fullness that comes from respecting love's rhythms. Only when there is enough heat will there be unity. To give birth to what's divine requires the slow patience of gestation.

The sublime has to be waited for. In shorthand, that's Advent.

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The Fire Inside



In every cell of our bodies and in the very DNA of our souls we ache for someone or something that we have not yet known, ache in a way that leaves us dissatisfied and restless inside our own skins. Our lives always seem too small for us. Moreover—and this is the key—this is God’s doing. God is the hand behind this “intolerable shirt of flame,” as T. S. Eliot puts it.

The fire inside us comes from the way God made us, namely, to crave the infinite and to be dissatisfied with everything else until that love is consummated. Thus, the fire inside us will never be extinguished simply by attaining the right partner, the right job, the right set of friends, or the right recognition. We will always be on fire.

When Saint Augustine says: “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you,” he is, of course, pointing out why God made us this way. It is a guarantee that we will never be satisfied with anything less than the infinite and the eternal.

Advent celebrates human longing. It asks us not to deny our longings but to enter them, deepen them, and widen them until we undergo a metamorphosis.

Longing shapes the soul in many ways, particularly by helping create the space within us where God can be born. Longing leads us to the stable and the manger of Bethlehem. It carves out a trough into which God can be born.

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Healthy Chastity



In his controversial book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, American educator Allan Bloom suggests that lack of chastity is the leading cause of unhappiness among young people. His thesis runs something like this: “I look at the students I teach, young 20-year-olds, and I see most everything, except happiness. Young people have been everywhere and experienced everything. But they have never had anything sublime in their lives because sublimity depends upon waiting and waiting depends upon chastity. Whatever else they may have had in life, they have never had these: sublimity, waiting, and chastity.”

It’s interesting to see chastity so defended by a purely secular analyst because today in Western culture chastity is for the most part denigrated in the arts, intellectual circles, and popular culture. Among many of the novelists, critics, and even religious people that I read, preaching chastity isn’t just backwards and naïve—it’s evil, a kind of reverse pornography.

But a healthy chastity is not so much about sex as it is about reverence and respect. It is not just about what we experience, but also about when we experience it. An experience can be wrong simply because it is premature. Chastity, in the end, is about waiting, about trying to carry all things, not just sex, at a more sublime level. To surround anything with proper reverence is to say that it’s important.

Waiting and chastity, these are not the virtues of our time. Advent is the season that celebrates these virtues, both by pointing desire towards its adequate object and by teaching us to wait.

*An experience can be wrong simply because
it is premature.*

Loneliness and Longing



At the end of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes: “There is a loneliness that can be rocked....Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one’s own feet going seem to come from a far-off place.”

All of us experience this loneliness that roams, that can make us strange to ourselves, that haunts the soul. This kind of loneliness cannot be soothed by a rocking chair. No. It drives us outward, to far-off places.

What’s to be gleaned from our wandering? Has loneliness a design? Is there a secret to be learned from our longing?

What we learn is that we are more: more than any moment in our lives, more than any humiliation, more than any achievement, more than the limits of our bodies, marriages, and jobs. Longing takes us beyond. It teaches us—better yet, it lets us touch through desire—God’s deep design for each of us. In the end, our longings are about consummation, completeness, harmony, and justice. In our longing, the mystics tell us, we intuit the Kingdom of God.

Advent is about getting in touch with our longing, about letting it teach us that we are more than the limits of our present. It is about coming to a new hope through it, and about getting pregnant through its seed. In longing are the deep seeds of hope.

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. There is also another kind that roams—and this kind drives us into Advent.

*In our longing, the mystics tell us,
we intuit the Kingdom of God.*

The Algebra of Advent



Some years ago, Robert Waller published a book that became a runaway bestseller and an immensely popular movie. Entitled *The Bridges of Madison County*, it fired the romantic imagination in a way that few other stories have in recent times.

The story runs this way:

A photographer for National Geographic magazine is sent out to photograph a series of old bridges in Madison County. Lost, he stops at a farmhouse to ask for directions. As chance would have it, the man of the house has just left for a cattle show. His wife is home alone and she and the photographer instantly sense a deep connection and quickly fall in love. Karma, soul mates, mysticism, whatever, they experience a rare and a powerful affinity. Within hours they are in bed with each other, triggering a love affair that leaves both of them sacramentally scarred for the rest of their lives.

What we are asked to believe is that something truly sublime has taken place, a noble thing worth more than life itself. But can this be so? Can anyone paint a masterpiece or compose a great symphony in a couple of hours? Can sex with someone you met just two hours before be sublime?

Advent is about proper waiting. For something to be sublime there must first be sublimation. Fasting is the necessary prelude to genuine feasting. Greatness of soul is contingent on first nobly carrying tension and not resolving these tensions prematurely. That's the algebra of Advent.

*Can anyone paint a masterpiece or
compose a great symphony in a couple of hours?*

The Power of a Candle



In South Africa, prior to the abolition of apartheid, people used to light candles and place them in their windows as a sign of hope, a sign that one day this injustice would be overcome. At one point, the authorities began to crack down on this. It became illegal to have a lit candle in your window, as illegal as carrying a firearm. The irony of this was not missed by the children. They soon had a joke among themselves: “The government is afraid of candles!”

Eventually, as we know, apartheid was overcome. Reflecting upon the forces that helped overthrow it, it is fairly evident that candles, lit religious candles, were more powerful, ultimately, than were firearms. Hope is more powerful than any army.

But what is hope? Many of us mistake wishing for hope. They are not at all the same. Wishing is fantasy, pure and simple. Thus, for example, I can wish that I might win a million dollars, but that is not connected to any reality. It is simple daydreaming. You do not light a candle for a daydream.

Hope is based upon a promise, the promise of God, a promise that says that—human sin and power notwithstanding—justice, peace, love, harmony, gentleness, and graciousness will, eventually, become reality. To light a candle, then, is to say that gentleness and graciousness are ultimately more powerful than threats, torture, and guns. To light a candle is to proclaim to the world that our real allegiance is given to something and to someone beyond them.

In retrospect, the government’s paranoia about candles was well-founded. A lit candle is a powerful statement of hope.

Hope is more powerful than any army.

Waiting in Joyful Hope



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a man of hope. Indeed his whole vision of things is generally criticized for being too hopeful. So, in trying to explain hope and Advent, allow me a Teilhard story:

Teilhard was a scientist, but he was also a priest and a man whose ultimate vision of things was formed by the gospels. Central to his system of thought was his rock-bottom belief that ultimately all of history, cosmic and human, would come together in Christ into one community of life and love. Yet he was surrounded by colleagues, both Christian and secular, who had a far less hopeful view of things. One day he was challenged this way: “You have an enchanted view of history, believing that everything will one day culminate in a wonderful ‘kingdom’ of peace and love, but suppose we blow up the world in a nuclear war? What happens to your schema of things then?”

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His response to that question is a textbook definition of hope: “If we blow up the world it will be a great tragedy because it will set things back millions of years. But history will still culminate one day in a kingdom of peace and love—not because my theory says so, but because God promised it. In the resurrection God has shown the power to bring this about, despite the things we do.”

That’s hope, to be able to say, “It might take a million years or longer, but it will happen because God promised it.” We, like Teilhard, should be prepared to live in great patience as we wait for God to fulfill his promise.

*Ultimately, all of history, cosmic and human,
will come together in Christ.*

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Advent is a time to get in touch with our heartfelt longings and deepest desires. It is a time to give new birth to the soul as we wait in hope for the joyous celebration of the reality of Christ's presence among us—here and everywhere, now and for all time.

Daybreaks is a journey through the seasons of Advent and Christmas. Popular spiritual writer Father Ron Rolheiser guides the journey with provocative insights and daily reflections on the mystery of the Incarnation.

All who seek refuge from the commercial distractions of the holiday season will find a welcome spiritual retreat in the pages of *Daybreaks*. These daily reflections open the door to the wonder and beauty of Advent and Christmas, and lead to the true peace and joy that only Christ can give.

Father Ron Rolheiser is a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He is an internationally recognized community-builder, retreat director, and author. Father Rolheiser's weekly column is carried by more than fifty newspapers worldwide. He is the author of the best-selling books *The Shattered Lantern* and *The Holy Longing*.

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