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CANDLES IN THE
DARKNESS

EXPERIENCING ADVENT WITH THE
EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH



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WEEK 1

THE COMING OF CHRIST IN REDEMPTION

SOMETIME DURING THE REIGN of Caesar Augustus, a child is born in Bethlehem. From all appearances, this baby is like every other, though it is certainly odd he is born in a stable. Yet outside town, some angels bring a surprising announcement: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). This child is unique; he brings salvation.

For those of us who have heard the Christmas story many times, it can be easy to forget how striking this claim is—the Savior has finally come to redeem us. And indeed, since the fall of Adam and Eve from paradise, the world has been desperate for redemption. Sin, death, toil, and pain have marked the existence of every part of creation, as Paul notes in Romans 8:22: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Groaning, yearning, longing—these words describe the posture of all those who feared God in the Old Testament. They waited on the Lord to bring his redemption, promised as early as Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” This “first gospel” details the defeat of the deceptive serpent, historically interpreted as Satan—God will crush the head of the devil through Eve’s offspring. But *not yet*. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Malachi, and thousands of unnamed and named followers of Yahweh over thousands of years waited in expectation for a savior. And here he is, crying in a manger: Christ, the Son of God.



To reflect on Christ's coming of redemption is twofold. First, it is to meditate on why he came in the first place, even as a baby. He took on flesh for our sake to overcome sin, death, toil, and pain—the markers of what separated us from God in the garden. Christ's salvation brings life out of death, joy out of sorrow, peace out of violence, and above all union with himself. This is not a whimsical story or a Hallmark movie about a baby born in the wrong place. This is the story of thousands of years of expectation being fulfilled in the mystery of the manger.

Second, to contemplate the coming of redemption is to participate in the yearning of our Old Testament brothers and sisters who waited on the Lord's anointed to come. This is a cosmic drama we are invited to join. On this side of the manger, Christians enjoy the peace and security of Christ's redemptive work. But we are invited to participate in the longing of those waiting on the Savior to remember the depths of our sin, to reflect on the significance of his coming.

We must not assign the power and significance of Christ's first coming to the past. We must be reminded of Christ's transformative power for salvation in the present, longing with those who have not experienced it—either those who were born before Christ or those who are suffering in darkness now. By participating in this longing, we truly understand the gravity of its fulfillment in Christ and experience the joy of salvation.



DAY 1

First Sunday in Advent

BIBLE READING

Read about the eternal Word who takes on flesh in John 1:1-18.

HISTORICAL QUOTATION

Irenaeus of Lyon (*Second Century, France; Written in Greek*)

In the writings of Irenaeus, the connection between God in the manger and God at the beginning of creation is foregrounded. Writing only a century or so after the life of Christ, Irenaeus helps us see the importance of the sovereign Creator God born as a human baby, with all this implies. It was central to our faith from the very beginning.

He united man with God and brought about a communion of God and man, we being unable in any other wise to have part in incorruptibility, had it not been for his coming to us. For incorruptibility, while invisible and imperceptible, would not help us; so he became visible, that we might be taken into full communication with incorruptibility. And because, being implicated in the first formation of Adam, we were bound to death through disobedience, the bonds of death had necessarily to be loosed through the obedience of him who was made man for us; because death ruled in the body, it was necessary through the body that it should be done away with and let man go free from its oppression. So the Word was made flesh, in order that sin, destroyed by means of that same flesh, through which it had gained the mastery and taken hold and lorded it, should no longer be in us; and therefore our Lord took up the same first formation



for an incarnation, that so he might join battle on behalf of his forefathers, and overcome through Adam what had stricken us through Adam.

—*PROOF OF THE APOSTOLIC PREACHING* 31, PP. 67-68

REFLECTION

Most of us are familiar with the beautiful words near the beginning of John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). Yet, few of us read Luke 2 and John 1 in tandem, as they seem to share very different stories about Christ's origins. The eternal Word, the same God who uttered "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3) at the beginning, entered the darkness of the sinful world as the Light. In him, all those descended from Adam can be redeemed.

With Irenaeus, it is important to reflect on why the Word's assumption of flesh is necessary. While words carry powerful meaning, you cannot see them—they are invisible. God as the invisible Word remained outside our full understanding, beyond our comprehension; we heard him somewhat like how babies hear words, as unfathomable and elusive. When the Word became flesh, that changed. Suddenly, the incorruptible and invisible God was among us, in a visible form we could see, hear, and understand.

The Word literally came down to us, not just to earth but to our levels of comprehension, that we might see and understand and thus be returned to communion with God. Just as the first Adam could see and commune with God, through the Word's incarnation, we too can see and commune with God. Our flesh no longer rules us, for God has taken on flesh and won the battle against sin and death for us.

PRAYER

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in



every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

—COLOSSIANS 1:9-14





DAY 2

BIBLE READING

Read about the angel's announcement to Mary in Luke 1:26-38.

HISTORICAL QUOTATION

Paula the Elder (*Fourth Century, Italy; Written in Latin*)

Paula centers the angel's announcement to Mary, historically known as the annunciation, in her letter to Marcella. In this, Paula employs her knowledge of the biblical narrative to point toward the grandeur and holiness that lie behind the humble settings of this narrative.

This land is mountainous and set on high, lacking in earthly delights but it has greater spiritual delights. And Mary, mother of the Lord, after the angel's promise was made to her and she knew her womb would be the home of the Son of God, left the fields behind and went to the mountains. . . . Truly, if we come to the little lodging of Christ and Mary—for everyone praises most what s/he possesses—with what words, what speech can we describe the cave of the savior to you? And that enclosure in which the infant cried, it is to be honored more by silence than weak speech. Where are the wide porticos? Where the gilt ceilings? Where the homes clothed by the labor of the poor and the convicts? Where the lofty churches built like palaces from the possessions of the deprived, so that a vile body of man can walk with more value, as if one could wish to see any roof more ornate than heaven? Behold in this small hole of earth the creator of the heavens was born. Here he was wrapped in cloth, here he was seen by shepherds, here he was revealed by the star, here adored by the magi. And, I think, this place is holier than the Tarpeian



rock which was so often struck by heaven's lightning because it displeased the lord.

—“A LETTER FROM PAULA THE ELDER, TO MARCELLA”

REFLECTION

Mary was not a person of status, nor did she live in one of the centers of the ancient world. And if the scene of the annunciation of the incarnation is humble, the scene of the birth of the Lord is even more so. Gabriel's announcement to Mary promises the splendor that is to come from her womb: the Son of the Most High, the heir to the throne of David, an eternal king. It is perhaps no surprise Mary's response is shock and questions, not just because she is a virgin but because the coming of the Lord in frail human flesh is surprising to say the least.

In this first coming of Christ, that glory and divine splendor that will eventually be revealed is not immediately apparent, either to Mary or to anyone else. Christ came not in an ornate and beautiful building but in a humble stable. Early Christians and some traditions assumed the setting to be a cave, as Paula clearly does here; regardless of what exactly a first-century stable looked like, it was certainly not a palace, as might have been expected for the birth of God incarnate. In this humble setting, we learn more about who God is. God is holy and sovereign, yes, but God is holy because of who he is, not because of what surrounds him. In the circumstances of the annunciation and incarnation, we see the power and sovereignty of God but also that God's ways are not our ways. If we think to honor him with our wealth or our works or any other earthly standard, we have misunderstood who he is and what holiness looks like.

Let us, like Paula, see the holy beauty in the humble things God chose to glorify in his coming. As we look toward the incarnation, let us not look for the glories of this world but instead for the glory of God, unexpected as it might be to us.



PRAYER

Let our prayer, O Lord, come before you in the morning. You took upon yourself our feeble and suffering nature; grant us to pass this day in gladness and peace, without stumbling and without stain; that reaching the evening without any temptation, we may praise you the Eternal King: through your mercy, O our God, who is blessed and does live, and govern all things, world without end. Amen.

—MOZARABIC LITURGY





DAY 3

BIBLE READING

Read about the angel's visit to Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25.

HISTORICAL QUOTATION

Hildegard of Bingen (*Twelfth Century, Germany; Written in Latin*)

As we are entering this season of waiting, we read the opening of the nativity story, of the coming of the long-promised Messiah. Hildegard comments on this same passage, incorporated here throughout her sermon for the nuns under her care. She reads it in a way that might be surprising to us, though: It is not just a narrative about the announcement of Christ's coming but also an allegory for the Christian life.

“When Jesus’ mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came to live together” (Matthew 1:18). Now this betrothal first occurs in the baptism of any faithful soul whatsoever, which by accomplishing good deeds, becomes the mother and a member of Jesus’ [body] through the salvation of illumination. For the faithful soul is betrothed through baptism to Joseph, that is, to Wisdom, which knows every good thing in earthly and heavenly realms. It is found in some people of the world, in a mind that, instructed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, meditates on every heavenly thing. “Her husband” Joseph, clearly, Wisdom, in a bond of blessing, since Wisdom is righteous in all things, does not wish to hand over the soul to worldly things, because Wisdom meditates on the heavenly things above it. But he “wanted to divorce her secretly” (Matthew 1:19); in those things it desires, Wisdom wants to test for itself whether or not it will be able to complete what it began.



But when Wisdom handles these matters within itself, the admonition of heavenly inspiration appears in secret quiet, as “the angel of the Lord in a dream, saying: ‘Joseph, son of David,’” that is, the one whom no one can vanquish, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife” (Matthew 1:20); in other words, take without any hesitation the faithful soul. With trust, lead her with you to the things that you know in God, because she has been joined to you by holy baptism. “For what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20), namely, what the soul holds in her mind is from divine inspiration. “She will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Jesus” (Matthew 1:21). Clearly, the soul will accomplish this with a full and perfect deed, because by this it will be saved before Jesus. “He will save his people from their sins” when he frees the thoughts, speech, and all members of his body from the sources of sins and leads them to God by a faithful and salutary transferring.

—*HOMILY 6: THE EVE OF THE LORD’S BIRTH*, PP. 47-49

REFLECTION

In the betrothal of Mary and Joseph and the angelic answers to Joseph’s questions, Hildegard sees how those baptized into Christ can, through the Holy Spirit, gain wisdom and understanding. Answers to their questions come through communion with God.

The account of the coming of Christ starts off in a startling way, one that might leave us, like Joseph, with many questions to answer in the weeks leading up to Christ’s birth. As the angel reminds Joseph, there have been pinpricks of light in the darkness throughout the ages, pointing to the coming of the Light as Immanuel (God with us). The prophets knew the Light was coming; the time for the fulfillment of their words drew near. The waiting in the darkness left Joseph with questions, particularly when faced with the social stigma and scandal of a pregnancy during a betrothal. But these



questions were not without answers: Joseph simply had to wait and trust in what God had promised, just as we must wait and trust with our own questions.

As this passage in Matthew gives us an account of one specific birth in one specific time, it is perhaps easy to see this as a moment in the past—a single announcement that, while resonating throughout the ages, was a promise to one woman two thousand years ago. However, Hildegard reminds us it is not just Mary and Joseph who were betrothed, and it is not just Mary who received the promised good news. As members of the body of Christ, we are joined to the Wisdom of God. We are privileged to experience, through the incarnation, the union of heavenly and earthly things.

We may, like Joseph, not yet see the full joining of ourselves to the heavenly wisdom promised to us. However, we can trust that through Christ this joining has already taken place. We have access through Christ to the Wisdom of God, even as we live now in our earthly bodies. Most strikingly, the promise of salvation through the baby Mary carried is also a promise for us. Through the baby of the annunciation, all of us can be saved from the earthly sins, thoughts, and entanglements that have trapped us.

As we look forward to Christmas and the birth of Christ, we can do so in the knowledge we have already been freed from sin and joined with God through the work of Christ. Like Mary, let us rejoice in this. And like Joseph, let us trust even when God's ways are unclear to us.

PRAYER

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.



His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.

—LUKE 1:46-55

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