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*Cover art by Companion Suzanne LaVoie*
Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions, Volunteers and Staff,

Abundant blessings as we set out for our Advent crossing!

With this collection of reflections, *Awake! Wonder, Welcome*, we walk together into the season of waiting. Our committee was invited to imagine how we might create an Advent Reflection Guide to nourish the spiritual lives of each of us throughout the Institute and to honor this moment on our Journey of Oneness. We sought contributions from members of our Mercy family around the world, and we have been awed by their inspired responses in the forms of iconography, painting, photography, prose and verse. Vast diversity comprises Mercy’s oneness, and we marvel at its riches.

*Awake! Wonder, Welcome* begins with the First Sunday of Advent and concludes on Christmas Day. Each day’s reflection includes links to the readings of the day and a few questions to ponder as you pray.

We invite you to use this resource as you are called in your daily prayer. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Print the Advent Reflection Guide or save it on your computer or other electronic device for reading and reflection in your prayer each day.
2. Consider the reflection questions posed by the authors and artists.
3. Discuss the reflection questions in your own prayer circles. You can also join a virtual discussion on our website by visiting sistersofmercy.org/advent. Each day we will start a discussion using the commenting feature. Use the reply button to join the discussion. No login is necessary to add a comment but be sure to follow the instructions on the webpage for posting.

Thank you for being with us on the journey.

In Mercy,

The Advent Reflection Guide Committee

Sister Mary Bilderback
Associate Virginia Fifield
Sister Moira Flynn

Sister Danielle Gagnon
Companion Suzanne LaVoie
Sister Anne Marie Miller
Walking the Way of Wonder

Readings
Is. 2: 1-5
Ps. 122: 1-9
Rom. 13: 11-14
Mt. 24: 37-44

The following reflection is accompanied by the artwork to the left by Sister Celeste Nuttman.

Traveler’s musings:
Isaiah, our prophet, spoke offering such promise. But we are accustomed to our tribe, our people, our privilege and he tells others of joining us, walking together to the Lord’s mountain; others, not ours, strangers, aliens, outsiders, interlopers. We will protect and defend against them; carry spears and swords for safety in the darkness on an unfamiliar path made by our walking.

Now, well on the way, we find ourselves travelers together: feet in the same dust, thirst at the same wells, stories unfolding as we walk. Hope of such promise shared—room for us all with mountains to terrace, fields to plough, vines to prune, fruit in abundance. On such a pilgrim journey our vision grows wider: Aliens become allies, outsiders kin, interlopers helpers. Ploughs become necessities so swords are refashioned, spears unneeded among friends and pruning hooks more valued.

Hearts grow larger on this pilgrim way and darkness diminishes as we walk in increasing light. Indeed, “the night is far spent; the day draws near.” Training for war seems a bad dream we can lose. A new song is on our lips: “I rejoiced when I heard them say: ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ Because of my relatives and (new) friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you!’ Because of the house of our Lord, our God, I will pray for your good.”

—Reflection and artwork on page ii by Sister Celeste Nuttman

Questions for Reflection

What prophesy do we hear, hope in?
How are we armed on our unfamiliar path?
Which strangers and aliens do we travel with in the same dust and at the same wells, making our path by walking it?
Do we listen to each other’s stories, enlarging our hearts?
Is our armament transformed for the common good?
As the night diminishes, what is our new song?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
We All Long for Peace

Readings
Is. 4: 2-6  
Ps. 122: 1-9  
Mt. 8: 5-11

“Because of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you!’”

Advent, our preparation for the coming of Christ, is a time that brings the peace we all long for. Mary, our model of patience, invites us to accompany her as she births Christ into our broken and suffering world.

Many times we take peace for granted. At Mass we offer the sign of peace, which reminds us that we are all members of the same body who is Christ. True peace radiates from who we are as sons and daughters of the Most High. Our call is to be bearers of this peace, especially to our brothers and sisters who know only violence, hunger, deportation and indifference. We live in a world where people are grouped according to their race, color, creed, sexual orientation, gender, economic status or education level. How can these people experience the peace that Christ brings if we do not reach out to them?

By healing the centurion’s servant, Jesus restored peace in his house. His faith was well demonstrated and it moved Jesus to pity. Peace comes from within and without, so if one member of the human race is suffering, we all suffer. Catherine McAuley saw the plight of the poor of her time and it prompted her to do something about it. She challenged the unjust systems that oppressed the poor. As Mercy, we respond to the signs of our times as we see them.

As we wait in hope for the coming of the Messiah who will make us cry out like the people of old, “The people who lived in darkness have seen a great light!”, let us continue to practice the concept of “Ubuntu”—an African philosophy of oneness. “Umntu ngumntu ngabantu” … or, I am, because you are.

—Sister Winnie Njuguna

Questions for Reflection

Where do I long for peace in my life?  
How am I called to be Christ’s peace today?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
DECEMBER 3, 2019

Travels with my Camel

Readings
Is. 11: 1-10
Ps. 72: 1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17
Lk. 10: 21-24

Sometimes I have felt as though I have been riding on a camel following a star, not sure where I was going but being strangely attracted to a mysterious light in the sky. Sometimes I have felt a little dizzy and confused and wondered if I was heading in the right direction or just wandering aimlessly in the desert. Sometimes I have felt like I have been atop this camel for a long time, and I was tired and my muscles ached.

Every once in a while, I would think that I had found the reason for the star that seemed to be calling me. Then there were the times I just got tired and irritated with my bewilderment, and my camel and I would then just sit down and refuse to go any farther. But then the star would reappear and once again we traveled on, not quite knowing where we were going but knowing that we were being called to continue our journey.

There have been times when I lost sight of the star because there were so many other stars. I tried to follow them all but just became confused and frustrated. And there have been times when I couldn't find the star. The skies were dark, and clouds seemed to hide her brilliance.

Sometimes, out of pure frustration, I would just stare at the blank sky and wonder if there really was a star to follow. And then there are those times when I felt as though I was all alone in my quest. During those times, I looked around and searched the horizon and looked at the ground and found footprints of others attracted to the star. Sometimes on blind faith I followed those footprints. Sometimes I would follow the camel and rider up ahead and trust that we were all going in the right direction. Sometimes I traveled alone, sometimes with others, but always following the light in the sky.

For now, my camel and I continue, one step at a time, getting closer and closer, following the star that seems to be calling us on. I look around and notice that I am not alone; there are other camels and riders traveling with us. Slowly we advance, encouraging one another, watching the star and listening to her say to us, “Come along. Come along.”

—Cynthia Sartor, Companion in Mercy

Question for Reflection

The star that you are following, what do you hear it saying to you?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Preventing our Hearts

Readings
Is. 25: 6-10A
Ps. 23: 1-3A, 3B-4, 5, 6
Mt. 15: 29-37

In today’s readings, we are reminded once again of the immense and profound love God has for all God’s daughters and sons and all creation. In the book of Isaiah we encounter a God of the universe full of love and mercy who prepares to celebrate with all peoples. For God wants all sons and daughters to be happy and to rejoice in God’s love and tenderness.

For all of us, Advent is a time to prepare our hearts and our whole being just like a farmer who with enthusiasm and hope prepares the land so that it can break open to birth a new life. It is also a time to look at our journey in mercy to see how God has been accompanying and sustaining us—throughout our communities where we live and share, in our ministries or in other spaces where we share our gifts, and in our spiritual journey. We can also look at how we are putting into practice in our community life and in our ministries the Critical Concerns that we committed ourselves to at the Institute Chapter.

If we each shared our blessings received and how God has sustained us in the challenging moments in our journey in mercy, we would be astonished, just as the disciples in the Gospel. God manifests in every moment, in every event, in every person, in every detail of life. God continues to invite us to share our blessings with compassion.

The questions we can ask ourselves today are: How am I preparing for Jesus to be reborn again in my heart? In what concrete moments in my life was I astonished by God’s action?

—Sister Nidia H. Quispe

Questions for Reflection

How am I preparing for Jesus to be reborn again in my heart? In what concrete moments in my life was I astonished by God’s action?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Today’s Gospel story is a very familiar one that even the smallest child can recount. In Sunday school, we were all told to “build our house on the rock.” As a child I often wondered when was I going to be able to build my house. It wasn’t until much later that I learned that it meant build my “house”—my life—on the principles of Christianity. I understood that when others encounter me, I must model something different. Sadly to say sometimes there is no difference; I can be just as flawed as the next person.

As a Sister of Mercy I know and believe in our Critical Concerns, especially the one that focuses on the Earth, because I live in the Amazon. However, my knowing and doing are not always in sync; the seemingly endless amount of natural resources in the Amazon make it a challenge for us each to remember to limit ourselves. On the other hand, one sometimes wonders what impact one person can have on this vast world. As someone once said, “If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito.”

—Sister Denise Lyttle

Questions for Reflection

What single act can I take each day to live consciously this knowing and doing?
How am I the “face of Jesus”?
What do I know but fail to act upon?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Anticipating the Healing Christ

**Readings**
Is. 29: 17-24  
Ps. 27: 1, 4, 13-14  
Mt. 9: 27-31

Two blind men come calling upon the Son of David to heal them. They know he is the Messiah and that healing can only come from God. When we gaze at the icon we are caught in a moment of faith. We aren’t only called to see “the picture” but also to experience our own blindness. We anticipate the healing Christ and know that he will restore our sight. Icons demand that we come to know through what we see.

—Reflection and icon by Sister Anne Sekul

**Questions for Reflection**

What is the blindness for which I seek healing? How do I respond to the blindness of others?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
My parents gifted me with piano lessons when I was 8 years old. Despite my teacher's best efforts, I didn't take to it. As much as I tried, I struck all the wrong notes. There was one exception: The Beginner's Christmas Songbook!

Oh, I loved playing carols and could not help myself from ringing out “Joy to the World” and other classics over and over, in July. My patient mother, having tired of “Here Comes Santa Claus” in single note melody, explained that I needed to take a break from the Christmas songs until the first of December. It seemed an eternity. How was I to wait so long?

As I've grown older, the kinds of waiting have become more serious. Sure, there are the nuisances of long lines, unexplained traffic, and musak while I wait to speak with the next available operator. Then there are the really hard things: waiting for medical test results; waiting for the news of new life … or death; waiting to see someone dearly missed. There is cost in waiting: our troubled minds, our aching hearts. Longing, worrying, resisting.

Psalm 147 assures, “Blessed are all who wait for the Lord.” Blessed, indeed, are we who abide in prayer, who remain in hope, who rest in God, especially when the waiting bears great cost.

In today's Gospel Jesus says, “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.” What is it that we receive without cost? An answer leaps from Matthew's earlier verse, “… his heart was moved to pity for them.” We never have to wait for God to be with us in our suffering.

Advent prepares our hearts to receive God's mercy given again and again in extravagance, and then to give—to be—mercy in return, extravagantly, without counting the cost.

—Sister Danielle Gagnon

Questions for Reflection

How is God present with me in this Advent waiting?
How am I invited to give without counting the cost?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Linger Lovingly and See

Readings
Is. 11: 1-10
Ps. 72: 1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17
Rom. 15: 4-9
Mt. 3: 1-12

Creation a holding space for God’s spirit
Deep within there is a stirring of God’s spirit touching into the place where it is written in our hearts.
Let us look with new eyes to what is within us already God’s spirit calling out Wisdom, Mercy, Justice.

—Reflection and photograph by Sister Leslie Porreca

Question for Reflection

What is God writing in your heart?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Mary’s ‘Yes’ to God

Readings
Gn. 3: 9-15, 20
Ps. 98: 1, 2-3AB, 3CD-4
Eph. 1: 3-6, 11-12
Lk. 1: 26-38

This drawing depicts Mary, the Immaculate Conception, free from sin. Her ‘yes’ to God is our key to salvation; Mary is the instrument of God’s victory. We are called to be like Mary to serve God through his people.

—Reflection and artwork by Sister Nimfa Exchaure

Question for Reflection

What services or gifts can you offer to Jesus to participate in God’s plan of salvation and help become builders of the Kingdom in the present time?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
We Wait … Because …

Readings
Is. 40: 1-11
Ps. 96: 1-2, 3 and 10 AC, 11-12, 13
Mt. 18: 12-14

Strength emanates from weakness, victory rises from defeat and comfort shadows pain.

A fatal car crash! How is a 15-year-old boy able to recover from critical injuries and desire to live life to his full potential after learning his mom, dad and younger brother are dead?

How is parched land restored to grassy green and urban shrubbery?

How is a sexually abused person able to heal from the abyss of deep, aged wounds?

How does one survive when drained of hope and gripped by fear?

A placid lake smoothly fades into a rushing river: a source for life. A few days later a rushing river becomes a deadly force. How does a city rebuild after winds of Florence, Andrew and Katrina? How does a community recover from the smoldering devastation of California fires?

Once a cutter now a therapist … Once suicidal now filled with life …

God grants comfort, strength and wisdom in the midst of desperation.

Vibrant colors of floral patterns appear on hillsides outlining valleys where people swarm in poverty. Fields of corn, cabbage, cotton and tobacco hide one-room shacks with red clay floors where migrant workers live, yet children are carefree and families are together.

How does one restore one’s reputation and recover from character assassination and retaliation?

Have you ever been amazed by the resilience of the human body: physically, psychologically, spiritually?

Gunshots no longer pierce silent nights if in daylight human targets are in sight.

Have you wondered how a mother can bury her 12-year-old daughter on Friday and return to work on Monday? Have you asked, “Why”?

How can a murder victim’s brother forgive the killer in court?

Where is the value in forgiveness or discomfort?

It does not matter how weak we are if we consider how magnificent God is!

Have you ever considered what hurts the heart of God?

All can be … “because the breath of God blows on them.” (Is. 40:7)

—Reflection and artwork by Sister Larretta Rivera-Williams

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Lightening the Burden

Readings
Is. 40: 25-31
Ps. 103: 1-4, 8 and 10
Mt. 11: 28-30

On a glorious fall day I wandered the grounds of the Woodstock, Connecticut, agricultural fair. I decided to watch the ox-pulling contest and it was at that event that today's Scripture came alive.

Each farmer led his team to the field where they were hitched to a sled weighted down with as much as 2,000 pounds of cinder blocks. The contest consisted of three rounds, with more weight added each time. The winner was determined by the distance covered and the weight they were able to bear.

Most of the farmers used similar techniques in lining up their yoked oxen—pushing, prodding, sometimes snapping a small stick over them, and using loud voices. Some oxen pulled against one another, some got off track, others barely budged, a few went a fair distance.

But one farmer gently led his oxen out, moved in front of them and knelt down. He took their large heads in his arms and leaned into them as if to converse. Then he walked to the sidelines, pointed in the direction, and simply and quietly said, “Pull.” Those oxen pulled farther and faster than any other pair and with the heaviest load. The blue ribbon belonged to this team.

How could I miss the significance of what I saw before my eyes? The farmer was a gentle person, loving and tender towards these animals ... and they trusted his leading.

Today’s Scripture is an invitation for us to lean into the shoulder of Jesus who bears our burden side by side with us. In that safe place our souls find rest and our burden is light.

—Companion Suzanne LaVoie

Question for Reflection

What burden do I need to share with Jesus?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Roots Hold Life

Readings
Zec. 2: 14-17 or
Rev. 11: 19A; 12: 1-6A; 10AB
Judith 13: 18BCDE, 19
Lk. 1: 26-38 or 39-47

This piece was inspired by Psalm 85:11-12: “Love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss. Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven.”

The image of the tree represents the circle of life that begins at birth. The shining star illuminates the way to the “crib in Belén” where Jesus, our Emmanuel, was born.

—Reflection and artwork by Sister Alicia Mac Adden

Question for Reflection

Where and how are justice and new life being born among us?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Look at this Generation!

Readings
Is. 48: 17-19
Ps. 1: 1-2, 3, 4, 6
Mt. 11: 16-19

Advent weaves her mystery around us. Hints of gentleness and tenderness and darkness envelop us. She breathes expectation and hope and promise. Her days are filled with wonder. Into this Advent mystery comes Jesus’ lament: “To what shall I compare this generation?” Into this Advent mystery comes condemnation from the crowd: “He is possessed … a glutton … a drunkard … a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” The juxtaposition of the season with the harshness of the readings is jarring.

Do we need to be jarred? What would happen if we spun these familiar words another way? What might Jesus, that master storyteller, say to us? Would he speak here what he does elsewhere about banquets and feasts and friendship? Might he say, “Look at this generation! They know from where they come. They feast on their belovedness as friends and prophets of God. Look at them! They drink to the unity that is possible in diversity! Look at them! They know the company they keep speaks about who they are with one another. Look at them: feasting, drinking, loving, hoping, dreaming, serving …

“Look at them: They defy the expectations of those around them. For God, God alone, teaches them what is good. Possessed by a joy that knows no bounds, their very lives speak to the wonder of a God who explodes into human consciousness.”

—Sister Megan Brown

Question for Reflection

What does Jesus see when he looks at me? At us?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
O Living Flame of Love

Readings
Sir. 48: 1-4, 9-11
Ps. 80: 2AC and 3B, 15-16, 18-19
Mt. 17: 9A, 10-13

O Living Flame of Love
How gently and how lovingly
You awaken in my bosom.
Where you secretly dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing,
Full of grace and glory,
How tenderly you fill me with your love.

St. John of the Cross, Stanza 4

Is this storm cloud a remnant of Ezekiel’s chariot afire or a glorious vision of God’s word swirling about in the heavens? For sky-gazers and occasional crazed race-for-the-sunset earthlings,

this picture is a manifestation of one of the triune God’s extraordinary and magnificent displays at day’s end in the Western Pacific.

St. John of the Cross, poet-artist whose memorial we celebrate today, offers a glimpse of the Living Flame who resides in the marrow of our being. St. John’s life’s work does not merely require knowing and understanding but beckons us to receive and experience the birthing of God within.

Catherine McAuley founded our Institute on Calvary. By doing so, she has consecrated each of us to the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ from which the redemptive power and mercy of God flow. As we prepare for Christmas, may the cacophony of human longing, strife and need, and the commercial life that teems all around us, be absorbed into the quiet peace of God’s transformative work in our world.

O, how the timeless and eternal love of God, which blazes throughout the cosmic universe, is contained without ceasing in the tenderness of our hearts!

—Reflection and photograph by Sister Marian Thérèse Arroyo

Question for Reflection

What catches the eye of your heart as you live in the flame of love amidst this season of anticipation and preparation?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Report What You See and Hear

Readings
Is. 35: 1-6A, 10
Ps. 146: 6-7, 8-9, 9-10
James 5: 7-10
Mt. 11: 2-11

O what joy we hear from Isaiah!
“They will meet with joy and gladness,
sorrow and mourning will flee.”

As hands are feeble, knees are weak, hearts are frightened, how we long for that day when the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be cleared, the lame will leap like a stag, the tongue of the mute will sing. Suffering and sorrow continue, the powerful dominate the weak, violence abounds. How long, O Lord, how long?

We live in faith and hope that the Lord will come and save us as we continue living love and mercy daily, some days patiently, some days crying out, how long, O Lord?!

Advent reminds us of the long history of waiting and moments of fulfillment. What is this year’s Advent longing—personally and collectively as Mercy community, as global citizens, ever aware of and acting through our Critical Concerns?

Imagine the imprisoned John the Baptist, who sends a message through his disciples to Jesus. Are you He who is to come or do we look for another? John’s whole life was devoted to preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. Jesus responds, “Report to John what you hear and see” Jesus continues with high praise for John and yet concludes his com-

ments with the least born into the kingdom of God is greater than he (John).

As Advent continues, may the mixture of Advent and Christmas sounds, the need to respond with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, and the multitude of gift giving fill you with patience in the midst of sorrow, firm in your belief that the Lord will come and save us, confident that joy and gladness will come in the presence and works of the Lord.

—Sister Claudette Schiratti

Question for Reflection

What do you long for this Advent season?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.

DECEMBER 15, 2019
The State of Unknowing

Readings
Nm. 24: 2-7, 15-17A
Ps. 25: 4-5AB, 6 and 7BC, 8-9
Mt. 21: 23-27

As we enter this Third Week of Advent, my favorite time of joy, today’s readings call us to a state of unknowing. We continue in our season of waiting. We are asked to admit there are many times when we simply do not know, and yet we are called to be people of faith. We call out with the psalmist, “Teach me your ways, O Lord!” (Ps. 25:4) We encounter Christ’s prompting to have the chief priests and elders admit, “We do not know”! (Mt. 21:27)

—Reflection and artwork by Sister Kelly Williams

In the midst of our joy and anticipation, what are the ways of the Lord that we need to learn? In which situations do we need to turn to God and say, “I do not know”? How are we opening ourselves to walk in the ways of the Lord and sit with our unknowing? Are we not called to trust that our God does know and will always walk with us?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Sisters of Mercy

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Jesus: Divine Word of Human Flesh

Readings
Gn. 49: 2, 8-10
Ps. 72: 1-2, 3-4AB, 7-8, 17
Mt. 1: 1-17

The Word becomes Flesh, flesh given then by Mary and the generations shaping her; flesh given now by us and every living being.

—Reflection and artwork by Sister Renee Yann

Questions for Reflection

How does the Divine Promise still impel the family of God? Who is the family of God for you?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Advent: A Time of Hope

Readings
Jer. 23: 5-8
Ps. 72: 1-2, 12-13, 18-19
Mt. 1: 18-25

Questions for Reflection

The way to “be” with a piece of visual art is simply to close your eyes and center yourself. Upon opening your eyes, and without thought, what in this piece first grabs your attention? It could be a color, a part of the image, such as the child or another element. Stay with what you see and ask yourself two questions: How does it feel? Then, what does it need? This can tap into something in yourself. It is a healing technique that can be used as meditation on any piece of artwork.

—IReflection and oil on canvas artwork by Sister Cheryl Phillips

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
God Is Constant

Readings
Jgs. 13: 2-7, 24-25A
Ps. 71: 3-4A, 5-6AB, 16-17
Lk. 1: 5-25

Manoah’s wife and Elizabeth learn they will have a baby after being labeled barren. Imagine how their worlds were turned upside down! I wonder what they did first. Did they prepare the nursery? Worry about costs? Host a gender reveal party? Or thank God?

What do we do when our expected future changes? The changes I tend to remember are the negative ones—illnesses of those I love, financial challenges and moves. During negative changes, I think many of us call on God the ATM—wanting to withdraw a desired outcome instead of face our reality.

I also call on God in times of uncertainty. Elizabeth went into seclusion for her months of uncertainty. A consequence, but it was also an opportunity to be still and know God is near. Am I as quick to talk to or think of God when I face a good turn of events? Or do I get swept up in congratulations, celebrations, and thinking of the next triumph? The psalm reminds us that God is constant—whether our seas of fortune are stormy or calm. Again this Advent, as I prepare to invite Jesus in, I pray to remember Jesus is always with me, a beloved in good times and in bad.

—Reflection and photograph by Associate Kathy Swift

Question for Reflection

What role do I allow God to play in unexpected changes?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Defiance unto Delight

Readings
Is. 7: 10-14
Ps. 24: 1-2, 3-4AB, 5-6
Lk. 1: 26-38

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.”
But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.”

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: A virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.
—Isaiah 7:10-14

Defiance unto Delight
No I won’t, Lord! I will not ask for a sign!
Don’t make me do it, Lord. What do I know About your hidden motives, your deep plans?
I’m so confused. What if a thunderbolt Comes flashing down because I speak your will Against my will? Whatever do I know Of virgin births and blessed mysteries?
I’m only me. Forget about it, Lord;
Please leave me out of this, this time at least.

And yet, and yet,
It’s growing on me, Lord;
I like the thought of calling out your Word – Your Word. Perhaps my words are part – A little part—of that all-naming Word. (Notice I said Word as a name this time.)
It’s growing on me, Lord, just as the Word Is growing in her heart, her life, her love. You win, Lord. Here I am at blessed last, Asking this one sign, speaking this one Word.
—Sister Maria Cordis Richey

Questions for Reflection

Have you ever been called upon to do something beyond your capacity? Did you do it far beyond your dreams? Was that you, or the Lord, or both as one?

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Perspectives on Luke 1: 39-45

Readings
Sg. 2: 8-14 or
Zep. 3: 14-18A
Ps. 33: 2-3, 11-12, 20-21
Lk. 1: 39-45

Suggestion: It may be helpful to prayerfully read this section in the context of all of Chapter 1 of St. Luke’s Gospel. Notice what catches your heart’s attention.

The median age for Sisters of Mercy of the Americas is approximately 78 years. This means approximately half of sisters are above 78 years of age and half are under 78. [Please note: Associates may have a different median age.]

Luke’s narrative offers us hope because both elder Elizabeth and young Mary are carriers of life. They indeed have something to share with one another and they each have life to birth for the sake of a future full of hope. We might say their stories flowed out of ordinary human experience in simple, unexpected—though surprising—ways.

Why would our lives be any different? So consider the following questions and allow them to move you into action.

—Sister Mary Waskowiak

Questions for Reflection

Take time to consider your entire life, with its “good news” and its “difficult news.” What title would you give your life at this time? Why?

What message of life (big and/or small) are you being called to take in, to allow to grow in you? What’s happening as you let that happen?

Choose a sister or associate who belongs to the “other half” of the median age split. Let yourself be nudged out of your comfort zone in making the choice of a listening partner. Contact her/him and share your reflections. Finally, reflect on the experience of life shared with another. If you have time, do it again as an Advent gift to self and others!

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Living in Harmony with the ‘Ruah’ (Spirit)

Readings
Is. 7: 10-14
Ps. 24: 1-6
Rom. 1: 1-7

Wake up, marvel and immerse yourself ever more in God, Wisdom and Mystery!

The prophecy of the Virgin who gives birth to a son appears in Is. 7: 10-14. Immanuel, God with us, makes himself present and in him we hear the promises we have heard so many times: “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

Psalm 24, 1-7: “Lift up your heads, O gates ... that the king of glory may enter.” This passage indicates that God-made-man has come to live with us and chooses to live in the Virgin Mary’s womb. In her, God becomes a human being! Mary, living in harmony with the “Ruah” (Spirit), contemplates history and reality with God’s eyes and in her Magnificat she sings the triumph of the living God. She teaches a fresher, more vital spirituality that transcends meditations, revitalizes rituals and seeks celebratory moments that favor an authentic experience of God.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul reminds them that, by the Spirit’s working, they have received the grace and mission so that all peoples may receive faith in Jesus Christ. We are part of them and, by grace, we have been chosen and consecrated. Being conscious we are called by God, we dare to contemplate the world with his gaze. Thus, we reread the “signs of time” and the moment we are living with the belief that the present is the “home” of the mystery of God’s mercy.

Let us ask together for the grace to live our charism and mission and be open to the Spirit that transforms us and turns us into caring beings so that we can marvel, welcome, heal and celebrate the mystery of Christmas anew.

—Sister Moira Flynn

Question for Reflection

What confidence grows in my heart through today’s readings?

Sisters, associates, companions, MVC volunteers and staff: Want to discuss this reflection? Share your comments at sistersofmercy.org/advent.
Called to Be God’s Messenger

Readings
Mal. 3: 1-4, 23-24  
Ps. 25: 4-5AB, 8-9, 10 and 14  
Lk. 1: 57-66

“Each of you must be a messenger—a prophet  
To speak truth and to expose lies.”  
—St. Oscar Romero

As we ponder today’s readings, we are confronted with the contrast between human plans and God’s plans. We do indeed desire a covenant with God, but seldom are we up to the task of listening to the messenger and being prepared for the refinement and purification required to be a prophet of God’s message. Being God’s messenger is dangerous work. All over the world, as we experience more scarcity of land and water, and our population is projected to surge from 7.7 billion to 9.7 billion by 2050, the struggle for survival is more intense. It becomes more difficult to truly listen to how God is leading us and to know how to deliver God’s message to our suffering world.

In the Gospel, the prevailing opinion was that the child of Elizabeth would be named after his father, Zechariah; yet Elizabeth had apparently heard God’s message and followed God’s choice of the name John. When we listen and follow God’s plan, better (though not necessarily easier) results ensue. Thankfully, the responsorial psalm reminds us that God guides and teaches in kindness and constancy when we are humble and open to God’s ways.

As we engage in the many celebrations of the Christmas season, may our prophetic approach be one of love, hope and compassion, while remembering the “fierce urgency of now” that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called to our attention so many years ago.

—Sister Michelle Gorman

Questions for Reflection

Do I really want to be guided and taught by God?  
Evidence? How open am I to listening to God’s plans for me; when do I act out of my own agenda? How am I a prophet of God’s truth?

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Awakening to the Promise

Readings
2 Sam. 7: 1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16
Ps. 89: 2-5, 27, 29
Lk. 1: 67-79

Today’s Gospel brings us back to the promise God gave to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. It brings us to the very beginning of Abraham and Sarah’s journey when God lays out his promise to his people: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.” Abraham and Sarah are elderly and have no children so are more than a little skeptical; Sarah even laughs at the thought. But God is faithful to his promise and in time Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is very similar. Gabriel appears to the elderly Zechariah with the news that Elizabeth would bear a child. Needless to say, Zechariah is doubtful. For this doubt, Zechariah is struck mute for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. But when the child is born and presented in the Temple for his naming, God releases Zechariah’s tongue and his first words are words of praise: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has favorably looked on his people and redeemed them.” He’s speaking of us. He then declares that it is John who will pave the way for the Messiah and remind the people of the “tender mercies of God.”

Zechariah’s canticle is for us today … we are the people of God. We are the ones to whom John calls to repent and prepare. We are the ones who, when darkness threatens to overwhelm us, can see the light that Jesus brings.

We are the ones to whom Jesus has promised to bring peace—a perfect unity with God and all of creation so we too can sing “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has favorably looked on his people and redeemed them.”

—Associate Virginia Fifield

Questions for Reflection

Globally, society is experiencing such turmoil. How do you hold on to the promise of God?

When do you experience the “tender mercies of God”?

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Questions for Reflection

What will it take for us to awaken and welcome all life on Earth as radiant—radiant with the “very imprint of God’s being”? (Heb. 1:3)

What wondrous dawn lies just beyond the darkness dimming our world today?

What gift can I give today to add to the depth of God’s love, to the fullness of God’s glory? What is Earth asking of us, her radiant dust, this Christmas?

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Readings
Is. 52: 7-10
Heb. 1: 1-6
Jn 1: 1-18

On the first day of Advent we heard: “Night is far spent. Day is near.” (Rom. 13:12)
Today is Christmas.

Once again
a new beginning. O!
Radiant dawn.
God breathes into Earth’s dust and is born. O!
Christmas. O!
Radiant dust.

—Poem and reflection by Sister Mary Bilderback
Photograph by John Bilderback
Notes
Thank you from the Institute Leadership Team

I’d like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Advent Reflection Guide Committee and all of the contributors for sharing their written insights and artistic talents this season. As we journey together as one, we value the way we each contribute to the spiritual life of our Institute.

In Mercy,

Sister Anne Marie Miller
on behalf of the
Institute Leadership Team