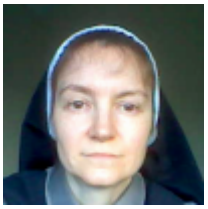
Columns
Spirituality



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by Clare Knowles

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In past years, I have struggled with the concept of Advent. It can feel disorientating to be in a season of preparation for the coming, next Dec. 25, of Christ who already came 2,000 years ago and whom we are expecting to come again at some unknown point in the future.

More recently, I have settled into a present-moment focus during Advent. I believe that Christ came in the past and will come again in the future, but the main purpose I find in Advent is to remind me that Christ is coming now. He is coming into the world today through every person who is willing to cooperate with God's saving grace.

Our Creator, whose holy name is "I AM" (Exodus 3:14), wants to meet us in the "now" of our lives. If I am living in the past or fixated on the future, I may miss the gift of God's grace in the present. Therefore, the Advent liturgies urge me to "stay awake" to God's presence in every moment "praying at all times" (Luke 21:36).

If I am awake, I cannot fail to notice that the world needs the light of Christ more than ever. Gathering storms of war, terrorism, inequality, ecological crises and a pandemic threaten to overwhelm humanity in my lifetime. It is easy to become discouraged by so much bad news.

However, the angel Gabriel's message that "nothing will be impossible to God" (Luke 1:37) is as true now as it was two millennia ago. It is not my own strength I must rely on, but God's power working through me. So, when God calls, if my self-doubt stands in the way, I can affirm with John the Baptist "someone is coming … who is more powerful than I am" (Luke 3:16). The Light of the world needs ready and willing channels.

Mary, the mother of Jesus is the exemplary channel, and it can be especially fruitful to meditate on her vocation during the season of Advent. As she received the Holy Spirit and brought the savior to birth, so, in a spiritual way, I can be inspired by the Word of God and, in carrying it out, make Christ visible in the world. St. Francis of Assisi called his followers to this way of living the Gospel, modeled on Mary's role in the Incarnation. He wrote:

> We are mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through a divine love and a pure and sincere conscience and give birth to Him through a

> holy activity which must shine as an example before others.

St. Bonaventure, who succeeded St. Francis as a leader and teacher in the order, based an extended reflection on this insight. His treatise "Five Feasts of the Child Jesus" guides us in stages through the process of receiving an inspiration from God and putting it into practice.

Bonaventure meditates on this action of God breaking through our lives in parallel with Mary's journey to the nativity and presentation of Jesus in the Temple. I find this little spiritual guidebook valuable during Advent because it gives an immediate personal relevance to the Gospel stories we hear leading to the birth of Christ. As Meister Eckhart reflected:

> What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture?

To know how God wants me to do this each day, I need to ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance and listen deeply in my heart to God's word. What I hear may be confirmed by prayerful discernment with my companions, or by signs and circumstances in my life. For example, at this stage in my life, I have discerned that God is asking me to write.

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This requires me to receive a message from the Holy Spirit, get it down in words on a computer as a complete body of work and then present it to the world. In a spiritual sense, this can feel like conceiving and giving birth to a word from God. Although it is not painful and exhausting like physical labor, it can be all-consuming mentally. As Bonaventure points out, the process of spiritual maternity also requires courage and determination. If I allow myself to be overcome by fear and self-doubt, the message I have been given will never see the light of day.

He highlights the importance of Mary's visit to Elizabeth, whose faith encouraged her to value and nurture the gift of God — "blessed is the fruit of your womb." He advises us similarly to keep company with spiritual friends whose belief will help us to persevere in the labor God has given us, so that Christ will be brought to birth

through us. I thank God that I have in my life such companions of mature faith, my "Elizabeths."

The Lord gives us every possible help to receive Him into our world. During Advent, the question is: Are we ready for Christ now? For me, the main focus of this season is not that Christ came in the past or will come in the future but that He is coming — a continuous present. He is the divine gift that keeps on giving. So, I pray always to be open the Spirit and able to respond with Christ: "Here I am! I am coming to obey your will" (Hebrews 10:7).

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.