2021 Advent Reflections from the Villanova Community
Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary.” (Lk 1:30)

Over and over in the readings of Advent, we hear the prophetic words: Be strong and fear not, for our God saves us. He is our refuge (Ps 27:1). He takes us by the hand to help us (Is 41:13). He rejoices over us and renews us (Zep 3:17).

Let us meditate on this message and embody it in our actions. May we trust that Jesus is with us, celebrate that he came in history to save us and look with hope to his return in glory.

—Your Friends in Mission and Ministry
May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all. (1 Thes 3:12)
Today’s Gospel is a jarring start to Advent! Its apocalyptic style foretells Jesus’ second coming at the end of the world, a period of difficulty and trial. We are reminded that, in the midst of challenges, difficulties and anxieties—and can’t we all relate at this moment in history?—we need to be a people of faith, hope and love.

Our eyes need to be looking up to the sky, not down at the ground. We must always be living our lives in preparation and anticipation because, as Luke tells us, “redemption is at hand” (Lk 21:28).

As we celebrate this season of Advent, let us not be overwhelmed with worry. Instead, may we embrace it as a time of healing and a wonderful opportunity to reach out to others in a spirit of fellowship and love.

—Brian McCaffrey ’89 VSB

Choose one area of your life that makes you anxious. How can faith turn your anxiety into anticipation? What random act of kindness can you do to share the spirit of this season?
They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. (Is 2:4)
In today’s Gospel, we hear a familiar phrase: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed” (Mt 8:8). We say these words each time we participate in the Eucharist.

The centurion acknowledges that he needs help but does so humbly. He understands he is but a servant to Jesus and that Jesus is the true authority. His faith in Jesus leads to his servant’s healing and creates an example for us.

In our experience of the Eucharist, we, much like the centurion, are acknowledging the true authority of Jesus as we prepare to enter into union with him via reception of Communion. However, this moment does not have to be limited to Mass. We are continuously working on our relationship with Jesus. Let us follow the centurion’s example and humbly submit ourselves each day to Jesus’ true love and care.

—Siobhan Cooney ’14 CLAS

How can you, like the centurion, humble yourself and ask for Jesus’ help?
Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Mt 4:19)
Advent provides another opportunity to discover the significance of the Gospel principle of subsidiarity.

Andrew heard the voice of Jesus as he walked by. Jesus called Andrew, and he calls me as I am, wanting me to use my skills and abilities to draw others to abundant life. Jesus believes in Andrew, as he believes in me.

We each have something to offer. No one is so poor that they have nothing to share. But it is also true that no one is so self-sufficient that they don’t need others to share with them. Jesus recognizes our talents and skills. He takes them and invites us to serve others through them.

Andrew responded to Jesus immediately. What holds me back? What nets do I need to leave to follow Jesus wholeheartedly? What obstacles or attachments are wound so tightly around me that I cannot get up and follow Jesus today?

—The Rev. Arthur Purcaro, OSA, PhD, ’72 CLAS, Assistant Vice President, Mission and Ministry

Is there something you are not willing to share?
In verdant pastures he gives me repose. (Ps 23:2)
Cynics dismiss what sounds like an amazing offer as “too good to be true.” No such thing as a free lunch, right?

Wrong, say today’s readings. Isaiah’s vision of God’s victory over death is not just a free lunch but a mouthwatering, five-star banquet on God’s mountain. “Let us rejoice and be glad that he has saved us!” (25:9). Jesus (in Hebrew, “God saves”) gives a foretaste of this meal when he hosts a free lunch, also on a mountain. So plentiful are the bread and fish that the crowd can’t finish them.

The overabundance of these meals—one that took place near the Sea of Galilee and one that will take place in heaven—is available to us in the Eucharist. Jesus again is the Host, and he freely gives his Body and Blood to satisfy our deepest hunger. It’s an offer too good to be passed up.

—Suzi Wentzel ’14 MA, Director of Communication, Mission and Ministry

Do you rejoice at God’s overflowing goodness?
THURSDAY
OF THE
FIRST
WEEK

Reading
Is 26:1–6

Psalm
Ps 118:1, 8–9, 19–21, 25–27a

Gospel
Mt 7:21, 24–27

A nation of firm purpose you keep in peace. (Is 26:3)
Today’s gospel offers a stark warning: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). This teaching reminds us that there is no guarantee everyone will get into heaven. But all is not lost, for it tells us how to live our lives so that we can enter.

We must “be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Mt 7:24), not sand. We must imitate the life of Christ, for that is what being Christian is all about. There is a richness to this call to live in imitation of Christ, listening to his words and following them in good times and in bad ones. By imitating how Jesus lived and how he told us to live—especially by loving unconditionally—we learn the will of the Father.

—Patrick McAllister ’20 CLAS

Ask for the grace to love as Jesus did. What good can you do with that love?
The LORD is my light and my salvation. (Ps 27:1)
Psalm 27 reminds us that the Lord is our light and our salvation. These words may be easy to say, but they are harder to understand or believe. I find today’s Gospel reading especially interesting, as two blind men ask Jesus to heal them. When he asks if they believe in his power, they answer yes.

Personally, whenever I feel lost, I don’t always have conviction in my faith. We are used to praying “Thy will be done” in the Lord’s Prayer and hearing Mary’s fiat when she said at the Annunciation, “Let it be done to me according to your word.” In contrast, Jesus tells the blind men, “Let it be done for you according to your faith.”

Having hope can be difficult in a world like ours. This Gospel shows us that belief in God, even during the worst of times, can change our lives for the better.

—Angelica Tiffany Garcia ’22 COE

Are you quick to ask God for help in your struggles, or do you shy away from God?
Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.
(Mt 10:8)
Advent celebrates the anticipation of the birth of Jesus, the King of Kings. Jesus’ arrival on earth brought the world the promise of eternal life.

The Gospel of Matthew wants us to proclaim the Good News of our salvation, along with God’s message of mercy and forgiveness: “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Ps 147:3). Just as the Twelve were sent out, we are called to reach out to the lost sheep—family members, friends and neighbors—in small ways to share the goodness of Jesus, whose “heart was moved with pity” for the crowds, for “they were troubled and abandoned” (Mt 9:35). His kindness, compassion and protection are available to all.

As we wait for the Lord, we are secure in the wisdom and power of God: “The Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 10:7).

—Jane Coburn P ’20

To whom can you proclaim the kingdom of heaven today?
I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you. (Phil 1:4)
As God’s word is proclaimed to us this weekend, it seems to me to be a message of hope.

After their exile from slavery, God’s prophet Baruch calls the people of Jerusalem to take off their robe of mourning and put on the splendor of God’s glory. Baruch is telling them “to hang in there.” In spite of their sinfulness, God is merciful.

Paul encourages the people of Philippi “to hang in there” because he has confidence that the One who began the good work in them will continue to complete it. John the Baptist urges the people “to hang in there,” for mountains will be made low, roads straight and rough ways smooth.

God’s message to us this Advent season, in spite of the pandemic, fires and floods, is “to hang in there.” Our God is merciful. He will complete the work He has begun in us and make smooth the rough ways of our lives.

—The Rev. Bill Waters, OSA, ’68 MA

Where in your life does God ask you “to hang in there”? Does God want to use you to give someone a sense of hope?
They will meet with joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning will flee. (Is 35:10)
While Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child, as well as to prepare for the second coming of Jesus, it is not a time to fear such preparations. Christ’s love is easy and without burden.

In today’s Gospel, a man is carried on a stretcher to Jesus. Before he and his cohorts even ask for help, Jesus tells them, “As for you, your sins are forgiven” (Lk 5:20). Their coming unannounced to Jesus proves their faith and demonstrates that they are prepared. Hence, they experience God’s mercy.

Jesus comes for you, for me, for all of us!

Isaiah reminds us today, “Be strong, do not fear” (35:4). Why should anyone fear the beautiful oasis that we are promised? “The desert and the parched land will exult” (v. 1); they will “rejoice with joyful song” (v. 2). We are being encouraged, for our God comes to save us.

—James P. Magee ’71 CLAS

Why is fear a common emotion when God’s people have been promised so much?
It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost. (Mt 18:14)
St. Ambrose was one of the two greatest influences on St. Augustine. The other, of course, was his mother, St. Monica.

When Ambrose was the Bishop of Milan, Augustine would go to listen to him speak to learn his persuasive style and techniques of oration, but not necessarily for the message of the Scriptures. However, over time, God’s Word pierced Augustine’s heart, and he began to reflect on the message of Jesus Christ that he had heard from Monica in his youth.

Ambrose and Monica were like good shepherds who gave their lives: tears, prayers, and voice to searching out the lost sheep (Augustine) until he could clearly hear and understand the call of God in his life. Augustine, in turn, became a good shepherd who attracted many to hear and follow God’s call. Let us rejoice and be glad that God works through those around us!

—The Rev. Bernie Scianna, OSA, PhD, ’87 CLAS, Senior Associate Dean of Students for Student Support

How have you helped others to hear the call of God in their lives? How have others helped you?
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High.  
(Lk 1:32)
The phrase “you have found favor” (Lk 1:30) makes me think of people who talk about seeking or searching for God, as one might search for clues in a scavenger hunt.

The reading from Ephesians tells us, though, that it is God who chooses us, that “in love he destined us for adoption” (1:4–5). Finding favor with God, I believe, is more about receptivity, an openness to receiving the goodness God wants to give.

We can put up roadblocks to receiving God’s favor—perhaps a resistance to change or a sense of our unworthiness. I remember a prayer a friend once gave me: Lord, help me to accept the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is. I stumbled on the word beautiful, anticipating instead some fault or flaw.

Mary, I think, accepted the truth about herself and was able to be open to receiving God’s favor.

—Madeline Bialecki ’82 CLAS, ’93 MA

What keeps you from being open to receiving God’s favor?
Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD. (Ps 145:10)
Often as I go through difficult times, I forget to pray to God for help. I think, I can figure it out. I can handle it. It’s too minor of a problem for God.

The first line of today’s reading from Isaiah, “I am the LORD, your God, who grasp your right hand” (41:13), really resonated with me because recently I had forgotten to ask God for assistance with several problems. The prophet’s words remind me that, no matter how often I forget to ask God for strength and help, no matter how large or small the problem is, God has me firmly in hand. He is always present, and nothing is too small for Him.

I pray that this Advent is a new beginning for each of us to reach out to God, trusting and knowing that He will take care of us and provide for us always.

—Karen Victorino, Friend of Villanova

What can you ask God to help you with today?
I, the LORD, your God, ... lead you on the way you should go. (Is 48:17)
Choosing to do the just thing, the “right” thing, especially in the face of adversity and disagreement from others, is a challenging endeavor. There are times when we, as Christians, know what is right and just, yet are faced with dissent and opposition to our principles from those around us. These situations, in which all of us are placed, test our own sense of morality, our sense of what is right.

Jesus illustrates this point in today’s Gospel. He points out society’s equally negative response to both John the Baptist’s fasting and his own feasting.

Having a strong foundation in God and conviction in your own values and moral compass is of utmost importance in such situations. This is not easy. How do we respond? We look toward God. It is imperative to remain steadfast in our faith, never waverer from our Christian values, for “wisdom is vindicated by her works” (Mt 11:19).

—Brian Emmert, MD, ’15 CLAS

How do you respond when others oppose you and your values? What are some personal and family values from which you never waver?
Blessed is he who shall have seen you. (Sir 48:11)
“Creator of the stars of night, your people’s everlasting light; Jesus Redeemer, save us all and hear your servants when they call.” These opening words of an Advent vesper hymn speak of the light for which we search during this season.

Today’s First Reading says that Elijah’s “words were as a flaming furnace” (Sir 48:1). Think of the light and power generated by this metaphor, written to convert our minds and hearts to God and purify us for the coming of Christ. The Gospel recounts Christ’s descent from the mountain with Peter, James and John, who have witnessed the brilliant light of the Transfiguration.

In each instance, the light transforms people just like us. The increasing light of Advent points us to the coming of Christ, not only at Christmas but also at the end of time. We are called to bring the light of Christ into the darkest corners of today’s world.

—Frank Herron ’63 CLAS

Are you igniting the light of Christ through your prayer so that you can radiate it to others? What is Jesus saying to you in today’s Gospel that will bring you closer to him?
With joy you will draw water at the fountain of salvation.
(Ps 12:3)

Readings
Zep 3:14–18a
Phil 4:4–7
Psalm
Is 12:2–6
Gospel
Lk 3:10–18
Every Christmas at my grandpa’s house, we gathered around the nativity to watch the youngest put baby Jesus in the manger. While our nativity has seen better days after 60 years of use, the memories I have of it make it one of the most beautiful parts of the season.

When my grandpa passed away two years ago, I was given his nativity to continue the tradition. Last year, however, my family was unable to be together because of the pandemic. Though I ceremoniously put Jesus in the manger with my husband, it wasn’t the same.

This year, I feel “no anxiety at all” (Phil 4:6). Each of us has been waiting for the joyous moments of Christmas, and it is fitting that the birth of Jesus will bring the world back together.

As we await the return of the blessed child to the manger, may you find the peace of God in your hearts.

—Christina Martin Schaff, MD, ’14 CLAS

What are you doing this Advent to find and keep the peace of God in your heart?
A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel. (Nm 24:17)
Today we meet some reluctant students, not fully open to learning the Lord’s ways. Balaam and the elders believed that they already knew the Lord’s teachings and didn’t need instruction. I guess most of us have done this and, from our own arrogance, shut out the Lord’s teachings.

Having a hunger to learn the Lord’s ways is the plea of the psalmist. Humility is a hallmark of a student willing to learn and accept what the teacher offers. We are given chances every day to learn what the Lord wants to teach us. Work and home are two excellent places of study.

Today we also remember St. Lucy, a fourth-century martyr. She was a student open to learning the ways of the Lord. Following Lucy, let us prepare for Christmas over the next 12 days by being open to learning the ways of the Lord.

—Patricia Rizzo, Esq., ’96 MA, Specialist, Gift Planning, University Advancement

How can a difficult colleague be a source for teaching you the ways of the Lord?
The LORD is close to the brokenhearted. (Ps 34:19)
Advent wakes us from our spiritual procrastination. In other seasons of the year, it’s easy to leave confession and penance to a later time. Advent reminds us of the urgency of responding to the call to love.

We learn from the parable of the two sons that good intentions are not enough. Talk is cheap. We also learn from Jesus, who was prompt in applying himself to his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor” (see Lk 4:18).

We already possess this Spirit, and abundantly so. For the Church to be revitalized, we have to act now—first by taking responsibility for our personal growth and then by putting our good intentions into action.

St. John of the Cross reminds us: “An action done entirely and purely for God, with a pure heart, creates a whole kingdom for those who make it.”

—The Rev. Deji Dada ’20 MS

What obstacles do you face in putting into action your good intentions? Do you rely solely on your efforts in being the good Christian you should be?
I form the light, and create the darkness. (Is 45:7)
The third week of Advent focuses on joy. The First Reading joyfully exclaims, “Let the earth open and salvation bud forth!” (Is 45:8). Today’s psalm inspires me to pray, “Come, Holy Spirit. Rain down your healing grace upon us and open our hearts to our loving Savior, Jesus!”

In the Gospel, John, who had leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb when he sensed the presence of Jesus in Mary, is experiencing doubts. From prison, he seeks confirmation that Jesus is “the one” (Lk 7:19). Jesus seems to confirm that he is the Christ when he responds that the lame, lepers and deaf are healed, and even the dead are restored to life.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt challenges us to grow in faith. Let us ask for the power of God to enter our lives and, with an attitude of gratitude, rejoice in the healing grace of Christ.

—Josephine Pastena P ’16

Do you wonder how God is working in your life?
You changed my mourning into dancing. (Ps 30:12)
As I reflect on today’s readings, I am struck by the contrasts and variations: abandonment and reconciliation, anger and love, mourning and dancing.

In the First Reading, we hear that the “deserted wife” will have many children (Is 54:1). In the Gospel, we learn that the “least in the Kingdom of God” is greater (Lk 7:28). How can that be?

Sometimes, it’s hard to imagine that something so unexpected could happen. I’ve often fallen into these traps of time, especially when things aren’t going well. “It will always be like this,” I say. “It will never change.” In those moments, it can be easier to be resigned than hopeful.

Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to this line in the responsorial psalm: “At nightfall, weeping enters in, but with the dawn, rejoicing” (Ps 30:6). With faith, trust and patience, things can change—sometimes overnight.

—Erica Dolson ’08 CLAS

When has God surprised you with an unexpected turn of events?
Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. (Mt 1:16)
Like all of us, Judah is a complicated person. He was envious of his father Jacob’s special love for his half-brother Joseph. Although he spoke out against the plot to kill Joseph, he did hatch the scheme to sell him into slavery.

Yet, in salvation history, Judah’s eventual selflessness in front of Joseph, who by then had risen to prominence in Egypt, pleading with Joseph to take him in place of Benjamin to spare Jacob’s already troubled and broken heart, is, for me, one of the greatest Old Testament examples of redemption.

That same Judah, then, was blessed with a line of descendants, culminating in the “lion of the tribe of Judah”: Jesus (Rv 5:5).

Our spiritual journey is a long one. Envy robs us of joy. Guilt over past mistakes can stifle our relationship with God. Through prayer, reflection and confession, Advent gives us an opportunity to experience anew Jesus’ redemptive love.

—Patrick Campbell Jr. ’85 VSB, ’88 JD

Which area of your life most needs to be healed and renewed?
May the whole earth be filled with his glory. (Ps 72:19)
What struck me in today’s readings was the psalm response “fullness of peace for ever” and the Gospel passage “God is with us” (Mt 1:23). I just received a “save the date” email for my Villanova reunion in 2022, since I graduated in a year that ends with a “2.” While it has been a long time since graduation, it feels like it has been shorter than the past 18 months, given what has been happening in the world and my own life.

I often speak with my Villanova friends about how fast the time has flown. None of us can believe it. We talk about the celebrations, the losses, our aging parents. So, when I saw the word “forever,” I paused. The past 30 years are just a blip in time. When we think of everything that has happened in our lives—good and bad—we can be at peace, knowing God is always with us.

—Danielle Fagan ’92 CLAS, ’95 MBA

When are you most aware that God is with you?
His greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace. (Mi 5:3–4)
Today’s Gospel is a favorite of mine, in addition to the announcement of the birth of Our Savior. Advent is such a joyous time, and Elizabeth’s words to Mary are a beautiful and marvelous expression of that joy.

We need to ask ourselves, what are we doing to express that joy? For many, it is through decorations and gifts, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, a simple “Merry Christmas!” to all we happen to meet is a great way to express our joy.

Advent also is a time of preparation, so we also need to ask ourselves, how are we preparing? Often it is by shopping, taking little ones to see Santa and making our homes beautiful. But as we add the nativity to a special place in our homes, we also should be preparing a special place in our minds and hearts for Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior.

—Fred Andrush ’86 VSB

Are you preparing a place in your heart for Jesus?
He shall receive a blessing from the LORD. (Ps 24:5)
I work as a pediatric OR nurse. Fortunately, I have not had too many COVID patients, but the stresses placed upon my colleagues, department and hospital due to the pandemic have taken a toll. Nurses across the country have left the profession. In these times, I have even questioned my own calling.

I think of Mary, a young woman living in Nazareth, who one day was approached by the angel Gabriel. She was afraid at first, but she intently listened to Gabriel’s message. Her strong faith led her to accept without any doubt God’s calling.

I recognized my call to nursing at an early age. Despite many challenges, I could not give up my dream. My time at Villanova led me to further find my passion in surgery. My trust in God’s guidance never wavered. I am proud of the nurse I have become. I would not have become one without Him.

—Hope Megan ’15 FCN

What is God calling you to this Advent?
He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals. (Zep 3:17–18)
Consider a positive action you could take or an intention you could bring to realization if you knew that you had unfailing support, love and encouragement. It’s an incredible, provocative thought! How could you open your heart to someone today and give of yourself? Make a phone call. Give a ride. Send a card. Share a meal.

Listen to the words of the prophet Zephaniah (3:17): “He will rejoice over you with gladness.” He will “renew you in his love.” And—this one really amazes me—“he will sing joyfully because of you.”

We have God’s love and support ... unconditionally. The Lord is with us, always. He stands by, waiting to catch us, available at a moment’s notice. He watches with pride, bursting with the promise of each of us ... the promise of YOU.

Today, rejoice in and share His love. He is with you and joyful because of you and your open heart.

—Suzanne Teleha, Center for Faith and Learning, Mission and Ministry

How can you share the joy of God’s unconditional love with another?
My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. (Lk 1:46)
I am awestruck contemplating Mary’s total surrender to God and powerful canticle of praise in response to the “biggest ask” in salvation history. Trying to put myself in her place, I struggle to focus on the Father’s goodness and the honor of being chosen, aware of the many fears, obstacles and limitations I would face and the daunting responsibility of bearing and raising the Savior of all humankind.

Truly this song is only possible through Mary’s profound trust in God’s goodness—a trust powered by His boundless grace.

Thank goodness God never asks anything this difficult of me! Yet, in our lives, there are many “big asks” from God that require great sacrifice and surrender. And like Mary, we can accept these missions if we trust in God’s grace. Then we, too, can sing praise for the opportunity to further Jesus’ work in the world.

—Deborah Morris Hastings, Friend of Villanova

Do you trust that God gives you the grace to do as He asks?
Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths.
(Ps 25:4)
“Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Mal 3:1). Today’s readings are about the birth of John the Baptist, chosen to prepare the way for Christ. We know that John did this by preaching repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

These readings are a reminder that we, too, have been chosen. After last year’s restrictions due to the pandemic, it has been quite easy to get caught up in the bustle of holiday tasks. We don’t need to live in the wilderness as John the Baptist did, but we do need to create our own kind of wilderness: time and space for quiet reflection and prayer. By acknowledging our sins and turning toward God, we make our hearts ready for the true joy of the season.

Christmas is in a few days. It’s not too late to prepare the way.

—Clair Sautner P ’23

Can you go into a wilderness of solitude and quiet to turn toward God?
The dawn from on high shall break upon us ... to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Lk 1:78–79)
The Canticle of Zechariah (Lk 1:67–79) is read every day during Morning Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours. In this Gospel, as well as the First Reading from 2 Samuel, we are told that God is always with us. We are called to recognize God’s presence—and the covenant that we are invited to share with God—in all that we do. Our work reflects God’s work of bringing light to those in darkness.

It is appropriate to pray this canticle every morning and become more mindful of the covenant God makes with us—a covenant of kindness and compassion. In the coming days of the Christmas season and in the new year, perhaps we can make Zechariah’s hymn our own and pray that we can show God’s kindness and compassion to others. May we be instruments of grace for others who live in some form of darkness.

—Barbara Wall, PhD, Editor, Journal of Catholic Social Thought

Toward whom is God calling you to be more compassionate?
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.

(Is 9:5)