

Fourth Sunday in Advent ~ the Candle of the Wise Ones

Along with the first three, we light the fourth candle encouraged to know that the wealthy and knowledgeable, the foreign and different ones, the elderly and widowed, these Wise Ones, recognised the promise of the babe, and the star in the sky, and responded generously and joyfully.



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Music for the fourth week of Advent:

Carol: As with gladness those of old did the guiding star behold ...

Taize: Bless the Lord my soul and bless God's holy name
Bless the Lord my soul, who leads me into life.

Handel's Messiah: Chorus: For unto us a child is born
Chorus: Hallelujah

We don't usually include Anna or Simeon in our nativity narratives, but these two are Wise Ones indeed. They brought gifts of praise and blessing, instead of gold and incense. Luke relates their encounters with baby Jesus:

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ... There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Somehow both Anna and Simeon were able to recognise the significance of the occasion, of the parents and child. They were tuned in to the movements of God's Spirit in their hearts; they were present and attentive to God. Is this something you are alert to in your life? When did you last notice a nudge from the Holy One?

What did you do in response?

There is a prayerful practice many centuries old that can lead us to being mindful and present to the significance of our days and weeks and years...the examen:

- ✚ Place your hand on your heart and ask Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are most grateful.**
- ✚ Ask God to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are least grateful.**
- ✚ Let your feelings come to the surface. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just the way you are.**
- ✚ Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. You may like to journal your learnings or share them with a family member or friend.**

Eternal God, grant to me this day and every day, such readiness and delight in following Christ, That whether my life is short or long I shall have lived abundantly. AMEN

Today is Day Two in the Fourth Week of Advent ~

We light the four candles encouraged to know that the wealthy and knowledgeable, the foreign and different ones, the elderly and widowed, these Wise Ones, recognised the promise of the babe, and the star in the sky, and responded generously and joyfully.

Read this passage through to remind yourself of the wise ones' story as Matthew tells it - and use your imagination to set the scene as vividly as you can: what would you see? what would you hear? What is in the background? What is the emotional atmosphere like? Take time to let the scene unfold.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise ones from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Judea with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he enquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet [Micah] ... Then Herod secretly called for the wise ones and learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage". When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now let yourself become part of this scene. Without forcing anything, what are you drawn to in the story? Perhaps you identify particularly with one of the characters, and take that role. Or maybe you are a bystander, a child, a serving boy, watching what is happening.

When you have found your place, allow the story to unfold: re-play the video in your imagination.

Now that you are part of the scene, notice how you find yourself responding – your thoughts, actions, feelings. Maybe the narrative unfolds a little differently to the biblical account. Notice what happens and trust God to take you there. Do you find yourself interacting with one of the characters? Is there anything you want to say or ask? Is there anything another wants to say to you? How do you respond?

When your imaginary journey through the story has come to an end, take some minutes to reflect. Consider how what happened might blend with your real life situation. How is the God of surprises nudging you? Allow this to lead to prayer, and journal your reflections. Linger as long as need be.

Eternal God, grant to me this day and every day, such readiness and delight in following Christ, That whether my life is short or long I shall have lived abundantly. AMEN

Today is Day Three in the Fourth Week of Advent ~

Along with the first three, we now light the fourth candle encouraged to know that the wealthy and knowledgeable, the foreign and different ones, the elderly and widowed, these Wise Ones, recognised the promise of the babe, and the star in the sky, and responded generously and joyfully.

The sequel to the visit of the wise ones is tragic.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [the wise ones] left for their own country by another route. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child and destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. ... When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise ones, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, according to the time he had learned from the astrologers. . . . When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said. "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up ... and went ...

If the astrologers had not followed the star, then this outrageous killing of infants would not have happened. Were they on the wrong track? No, the terror originated from a desperately insecure, sadly abusive leader, who had to control his world by any means. How do I react to being tricked, to events being out of my control? What do I do with my frustrations, when anger lurks?

How do we hold the ambiguity of a God who seems to protect and guide one family but leaves all the others exposed to infanticide? Was Joseph the only one alert to God's nudges?

Can I honestly express to the Holy One my thoughts and feelings in the face of injustice?

This prayerful examen practice can lead us to becoming aware of the significance of what is going on around us, the ambiguities of our motives, the messengers who are trying to get our attention:

- ✚ Place your hand on your heart and ask Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are most grateful.**
- ✚ Ask God to bring to your heart the moment today for which you are least grateful.**
- ✚ Let your feelings come to the surface. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just the way you are.**
- ✚ Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. You may like to journal your learnings or share them with a family member or friend.**

Eternal God, grant to me this day and every day, such readiness and delight in following Christ, That whether my life is short or long I shall have lived abundantly. AMEN

Christmas Day ~ the Candle of Jesus Emmanuel

We light the centre candle for Jesus who comes to us even now as a baby,

human and wholesome,

fragile and dependent,

breast-fed and bundled,

wearing neither logo or life insurance ...

waiting to be formed within us.



In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. . . . And Mary pondered these things in her heart.



Source unknown

This prayerful examen practice can help us, like Mary, ponder the many things in our heart:

- ✚ Place your hand on your heart and ask Jesus or God or the Holy Spirit to bring to your heart the moment today when you gave and received the most love.**
- ✚ Ask God to bring to your heart the moment when you gave and received the least love.**
- ✚ Let your feelings come to the surface. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just the way you are.**
- ✚ Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. You may like to journal your learnings or share them with a family member or friend.**

A blessing for you and those you are with today ~

**May you be filled with Light
May the indwelling presence of Christ heal you
May your fear be changed to love
May you be a gift ready to be given.
AMEN**

Today is the Day after Christmas in the Fourth Week of Advent ~
Again, we light all five candles; again we rejoice that Light has entered our world; again we welcome the Christ child; again, we honour the prophets, the parents, the ordinary people, the wise ones. . . and we are amazed.

Here's a quaint and poignant Christmas carol that doesn't even mention God or the advent events. It is a wee narrative about "Boxing Day" when traditionally the wealthy boxed up the goodies of the festive season to share with those in poverty. Yes, patronising and unconscious of the injustices they were complicit in, but still demonstrating kindness and mercy in the steps of Jesus. Note also that this good king was marking the memory of the first martyr Stephen. In many ways, the carol is worlds away from our contexts of 21st century New Zealand, India, Europe, but God's truth threads through.

Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that night though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight gath'ring winter fuel

"Hither, page, and stand by me if thou know'st it, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?"
"Sire, he lives a good league hence underneath the mountain
Right against the forest fence by Saint Agnes' fountain."

"Bring me flesh and bring me wine bring me pine logs hither
Thou and I will see him dine when we bear him thither."
Page and monarch forth they went forth they went together
Through the rude wind's wild lament and the bitter weather

"Sire, the night is darker now and the wind blows stronger
Fails my heart, I know not how, I can go no longer."
"Mark my footsteps, my good page; tread thou in them boldly
Thou shalt find the winter's rage freeze thy blood less coldly."

In his master's steps he trod where the snow lay dinted
Heat was in the very sod which the Saint had printed
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing
Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing

Return now to any of the laments, and prophetic passages in these Advent meditations; read again, and consider asking God for the gifts you need to fulfil a prophetic and advocacy role for justice in our world today.

You may find now is a good time to enter into silent and centred prayer....

Using your sacred word as a symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within, sit comfortably with eyes closed, and silently breathe your word several times.

- **Become still and wordless.**
- **When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word, thereby reaffirming your choice to be united with God.**
- **Let go again and again the distractions, the sounds, the feelings, the thoughts.**
- **Remain in stillness and silence, for 15 or 20 minutes ..**
- **At the end of the prayer period, open your eyes and stay still and silent for a couple more minutes.**
- **Be grateful. . .**

Eternal God, grant to us this day and every day, such readiness and delight in following Christ, That whether our lives are short or long we shall have lived abundantly. AMEN

Day is Day Six in the Fourth Week of Advent ~

With all five candles alight, we bring our meditations to rest, thankful again for the prophets and longing peoples, the perceptive and loving parents, the presence and worship of majestic angels and ordinary shepherds, the mystery and knowing of wise ones, and above all, thankful for the Most High who is content to gently reveal Godself as a vulnerable child – and to wait for us to notice.

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

Where were the places of greatest resonance in your meditations this week?

Return to that reading and reflection again.

Ask God to take you deeper in what God's Spirit revealed to you. Wait for God.

Several prayerful practices have been part of our Advent Wreath meditations: lectio divina was introduced on day 1, Week One; gospel contemplation on day 1, Week Two; centering prayer is developed in Week Three; the examen in Week Four; and repetition and going deeper is the invitation at the end of each week.

Each of these helps me to take care, take heart, and take time to be with the Lover of my soul.

Here is some more on the examen for you to take with you into the New Year ahead.

The examen is an old term used to describe a time of reflection at day's end. Through this simple prayerful practice, we learn to recognise those things which give us life and energy or which drag energy away from us, leaving us feeling drained and empty instead of renewed and encouraged. The examen can also help us identify patterns in our responses which might need our attention, such as a tendency to avoid conflict or to keep silent instead of speaking out about something important. Consistent attention to these interior movements can help us resolve problems and discern a way forward which will enable us to live out our unique way of giving and receiving love.

- ✚ Set aside ten to twenty minutes. Do whatever helps you to relax (e.g. light a candle, play some short reflective music) and breathe in the love of God and breathe out your worries.
- ✚ **With your hand on your heart and ask the Holy One to bring to your heart your response to one of these sets of questions**

When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself , to others ,to God?
When did I have the least sense of belonging?

When did I give and receive the most love today?
When did I give and receive the least love today?

How was I most aware of grace in my life today?
How was I least aware of grace in my life today?

For which moment in the day am I most grateful? For which am I least grateful?

(you can make up your own questions too.)

- ✚ **Let your feelings come to the surface. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just the way you are.**
- ✚ **Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. You may like to journal your learnings or share them with a family member or friend.**

**Eternal God, grant to us this day and every day, such readiness and delight in following Christ,
That whether our lives are short or long we shall have lived abundantly. AMEN**