First Sunday of Advent
Nov. 27

Where is the light of Advent?

Here’s a thought: For those of us inclined to make New Year’s resolutions, why not put those resolutions into action now, the start of the new liturgical year?

And perhaps those resolutions, as well as focusing inward (better diet, more exercise, less electronic device attachment), can be directed outward, toward those most in need through service offered lovingly, freely and generously.

None of us, by ourselves, will stop all of the wars, or comfort all of the sick, or feed all of the hungry. But by doing, as St. Teresa of Kolkata suggested, “small things with great love,” we can make a positive difference in the life of someone else.

That is how we prepare for Jesus’ return — not by giving up or hiding from the world, but by engaging the world and becoming the sources of light, hope, joy, peace and love that Jesus invites us to be.

Catholic journalist Mike Nelson writes from Southern California.

Second Sunday of Advent
Dec. 4

We belong to the one who is and was and is to come

Throughout Scripture, we see Jesus attend parties, share meals with friends and find joy in the innocence of children. Ours is not a joyless faith; just the opposite. It is a faith that finds joy even amid suffering, which is no easy thing.

This season of Advent and the Scripture readings that guide our way day by day provide the operating instructions for the difficult task of letting go of our unreality and clinging to the only reality that matters: Jesus Christ.

The rest of the world wants you to blast Mariah Carey around the clock, bake cookies till you drop and spend so much you’ll need six months to dig yourself out of debt. When you think about it, that doesn’t sound all that joyful, does it?

Advent, on the other hand, asks you to slow down, pause, breathe, wait, be. Can’t you feel your shoulders relax as you hear that? If you want a recipe for real joy, skip the world’s version and find what’s hiding in the challenging words of Scripture.

“Our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, not as it might be,” wrote famed Trappist monk Thomas Merton in his essay “Advent: Hope or Delusion?”

“The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that his plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to his will.

“Our Advent is a celebration of this hope. What is uncertain is not the ‘coming’ of Christ but our own reception of him, our own response to him, our own readiness and capacity to ‘go forth to meet him.’”

Mary DeTurris Poust is a writer and retreat leader living in upstate New York.

Third Sunday of Advent
Dec. 11

How Pope Francis views Advent’s call to hope

It is not idle chatter when Pope Francis speaks of hope.

People need “courage” when they are “under duress or suffering,” he remarked on Advent’s first Sunday in 2020. Advent is a reminder to them that “God is not distant” and “does not abandon” people.

Pope Francis made those remarks after the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the world. The pandemic posed threats to hope by generating “worry, fear and discouragement.”

He understands that powerful forces can darken people’s lives, wreaking havoc with the hope they need. One such force is fear.

Would it surprise you to hear that Pope Francis has spoken repeatedly of fear’s negative influence? Fear has a way of paralyzing people, he suggested in his 2019 apostolic exhortation “Christ Lives,” directed above all to young people.

“Keep following your hopes and dreams,” the pope urged.

He added that it is important to “avoid the paralysis of the living dead,” whereby a fear of making “mistakes” leads to forgetting that if mistakes are made “you can always get up and start over, for no one has the right to rob you of hope.”

David Gibson served on Catholic News Service’s editorial staff for 37 years.

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Dec. 18

We are called

The beautiful Gospel reading, Matthew 1:18-24, brings us to Joseph, Mary’s betrothed. A righteous man, Joseph does not want to subject Mary to public shame because she is with child before they have lived together. Rather, he will “divorce her quietly” (1:19).

But the Lord has another plan, a divine plan of salvation, and sends one of his angels to reveal it to Joseph in a dream.

First, the angel says, take courage: “Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home” (1:20). Then, the good news: The child, Jesus, is conceived through the Holy Spirit. He will “save his people from their sins” (1:21).

Joseph brings Mary into his home, and his response to the Lord’s call continues to inspire. We might think it would be easy to follow God’s call if God spoke directly to us, but we hear in these readings how that is not always the case. All that keeps us busy (and awake at night!) can weigh us down, make us spiritually distant from the reality of faith.

Yet, blessedly, the readings this Sunday gently call us to courage, to trust in God, to understand that God keeps promises made long ago — and draws us into a firm, freeing fellowship.

Maureen Pratt is a contributor to Catholic News Service.
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