

Reflections for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany 2023



"On that very special night, all people, of all lands in the world, beheld a beautiful sight. A very bright and shining star arose in the east. It was the biggest and brightest of all the stars in the universe. It was a sign, a sign of something great that was happening. A king was born that night. A king that would save the world from all the negativity that had befallen it. The King of Kings, the Prince of Peace, the Comforter, the Counsellor, the Lily of the Valley, the Redeemer, the Saviour, had been born"

Anglican Fellowship of Prayer
Diocese of Algoma

Introduction and Acknowledgments

This booklet of Reflections comes as a gift from the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer in the diocese of Algoma. We give thanks for our Bishop and Metropolitan Archbishop Anne Germond and for encouraging the ministry of prayer in many ways throughout the diocese and as Metropolitan.

Previous Advents focused on the gospel for Sundays or on the themes of the four candles in the circle of greenery on the Advent wreath: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. This Advent we reflect on Jesus' birth on earth, the Incarnation of the Word, in six sections or "pericopes". The scriptural text is printed and is followed by a reflection by one of the diocesan bishops in the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario or by a member of the National Executive of the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer.

You are invited to try something that may be new to you. Read the scripture as gospel-based discipleship so that the text becomes a prayer conversation between you and God. Don't try to figure out the main point as in a bible study, but rather listen to what the Holy One has to say to you about your life as a disciple of Jesus at this point in your journey, right now. Quiet yourself and invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you as you read the text 3 times. The first time listen for what jumps out at you. Read it a 2nd time listening for what God is saying to you personally as you read. Read it a 3rd time, listening for what Jesus is asking you to do in your life now.

Only after listening in a conversation with God is it time for one of our reflectors to join you in the circle to share how the text has affected them.

Reflectors are Diocesan bishops from 5 dioceses in Ontario:

~ Shane Parker for Ottawa and the cathedral in Ottawa

~ William Cliff for Ontario and the cathedral in Kingston

~ Susan Bell for Niagara and the cathedral in Hamilton

~ Archbishop Anne for Algoma and the cathedral in Sault Ste Marie

~ Archbishop Anne for Moosonee and the cathedral in Timmins (a missionary diocese of the province)

~ And the Rev. Canon Paul Feheley, National Directory of the Anglican Fellowship of Prayer

~ And myself, Dr. Carol Knox, A. F. P. Algoma and National Executive

Many thanks to St Paul's Thunder Bay for permission to use the painting "The Sign" by Abe Kakapetum and accompanying text on the cover.

Blessings on your Advent to Epiphany pilgrimage.

Dr Carol Knox: Editor.

Introduction to Advent

Advent is a season of hope. It is a season of expectation and anticipation.

It is the time we light candles to shoo away the darkness. It is the time of getting ready for the arrival of the Light of the World that no darkness will ever overcome.

It is the season that invites and energizes faithful action in us. It is the season that invites renewed trust in God whose grace opens the possibility of transformation for all human lives.

I recently came across this 'Declaration of Faith' from the Presbyterian Church in the USA that speaks boldly of Advent hope:

We know our efforts cannot bring in God's kingdom.

But hope plunges us into the struggle

For victories over evil that are possible now –

In the world, in the church, and our individual lives.

Hope gives us courage and energy to contend against all opposition, however invincible it may seem, for a new world and a new humanity that are surely coming.

(A Declaration of Faith PCUSA, Office of General Assembly 1991)

If there is ever a time when hope is needed, it is now. This kind of hope makes great demands on us and is very risky, especially as we speak hope into the storms of life. But we do it anyway, risking everything on God's promises, even on an uncertain future.

This Advent, let us then look back at God's awesome deeds in the past and let us, more importantly, look forward to a deep and abiding faith in God's future revelation.

This is a faith that, to quote my neighbour at camp, "risks everything and opens the big bale of hay", giving it our all, even through a heart of unbelief. We do not do it in our own strength or from any gifts we have been given, but only because we live knowing that "God is life" itself and there is no other way.

We are created God's people and claimed by God in baptism. God's coming enfolds us into the family of faith. God's initiative remakes us from the inside out. God's mercy heals and transforms our broken human hearts.

May it be so for you this Advent.

Thank you to all the contributors to this year's Advent Reflections, and to Dr. Carol Knox for bringing us together to reflect and pray through Advent.

+Anne: Algoma

Advent 1: An Angel Visits Mary ~ Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection ~ Visit by an Angel to Mary

Mary's response to the angel "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" is a frequent sermon topic for the first Sunday of Advent as we begin our journey to Jesus' birth. It's a positive response that parishioners are encouraged to emulate...sometimes with a look forward to what might be asked of them at Vestry in a few months: "is God calling you to be a lector, a Eucharistic Assistant, or maybe even a warden".....and then there is the call to be generous with financial giving as one fiscal year ends and budgets are prepared for the next.

However, when I read the text, what stands out for me is that Mary's response was not a quick "YES". Rather it comes at the end of the passage. In fact, her first reaction to the greeting of the angel, even before she is asked to do anything, is perplexity and confusion. Who wouldn't feel that way if an angel suddenly appeared in front of them? I know I would take a few steps back!

So, the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary." Gabriel even knows her name! Then we hear one of the most common phrases in the bible "Fear not". Someone counted 365 times. That's one for every day!! "Fear not Mary, Fear not Carol, Fear not Daniel". Then the angel adds that "nothing is impossible with God". Really?

A few weeks ago, I did a spiritual exercise that included an invitation to look deeply inside to discover what you are afraid of. Of course, there were the usual fears that most people have: not being included in something, someone not liking you, aging, and health challenges. The big one for me was fear that I might not have the wisdom to be able to do a ministry God seemed to be calling me to step up to.

That's where the rest of the angel's message to Mary, became God's message to me. Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age saying that "nothing is impossible with God". Mary then set out to Elizabeth's to check out the impossible.

The message for me in all this is to trust and believe. I pray that it can be for you also this Advent. We are nestled in the palm of God's hand and the Holy Spirit has the power to breathe into us whatever gifts we need for whatever we are called to be and do. Just as Mary set off to check things out with Elizabeth, I give thanks for the companions the Holy One gives us on our journey. Thanks be to God!

Dr. Carol Knox: A. F. P. Algoma and National Executive

Advent 2: Mary Visits Elizabeth ~ Luke 1:36-37, 39-56

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Reflection ~ Mary Visits Elizabeth

The words that Mary says as she visits her cousin Elizabeth are so familiar to us. They are known to us as one of the anchors of Evening Prayer – the *Magnificat*. They are comforting; well-worn and safe.

If that's true, then why does every phrase of the Magnificat ring out a revolution? Why does every sentence invert the way of the world and proclaim Kingdom ways?

I see it actually as *manifesto* both for Mary *and* for the church: the church which can draw a direct line from those words to its existence.

Mary may have been a lowly maiden, but God had done great things for her. She had been lifted up and given a purpose so great that it would change the world. In that purpose she saw all those who had been laid low by circumstances in this world, being gathered up in her own blessing. It is God's purpose and nature to lift up the lowly, to give them good things, to send the rich away empty.

And in recounting her blessings, Mary lists all the things that God has done. But notice that they are past actions that Mary is now caught up in. She has an active role. This is Mary's "yes" to God; to the role of being the God-bearer, but also to being involved in God's plan of salvation for the whole world.

Mary sings her song in praise of the God who has been keeping promises forever; in gratitude for God's kingdom being worked at and accomplished through us over the long arc of history. Mary knows that this latest promise from God – that the child born to her, a virgin, will be great – and will change the world.

When I listen with 21st century ears to Mary's manifesto, I hear some of the aims of the movement that so many of *our* young people are committed to. Those ideas are, at their best, rooted in the pursuit of justice for humans and for the earth, and in compassion for our fellow humans, and equity of health, resources, and opportunity. These are kingdom values which are important to me personally as well as in my ministry as Bishop of Niagara. And these kingdom values are remarkably similar to Mary's words.

As believers in Jesus the Christ, all that *we* do as the church must be – like Mary - in pursuit of justice and compassion in order to participate in God's promise to change the world.

+ Susan: Niagara

Advent 3: An Angel Visits Joseph in a Dream

~ Matthew 1:18-26

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife; but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection ~ An Angel Visits Joseph in a Dream

When was the last time all your plans were upended in a single moment? Perhaps you were planning on a big trip or had been looking forward to a particularly good holiday. Maybe your place of business suddenly changed their outlook and, God forbid, you found yourself out of work and worried about the future. WE all had a taste of that during the pandemic. Long cherished plans, weddings, trips, vacations, business plans all came to a screeching halt as we watched the world change before our eyes.

Whether by accident, world event, disease, war or personal tragedy, we all carry on as if our plans will unfold as they should. This is what happened to St. Joseph. He was preparing to be married and found that his bride-to-be was already pregnant. Not wanting to cause a scandal, he decided to put Mary aside quietly - not seeing her stoned to death but sent away quietly. His plan to marry Mary was set aside. But then he went to sleep.

For the second time, his plans were usurped. This time by a message from an angel.

“Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife for the child she is carrying is from the Holy Spirit...”.

I have wondered many times about the kind of trust and faithfulness that was required for St. Joseph to simply obey the command of God and carry on with his plans to wed Mary. I am not convinced that I would be as trusting. I would want to know why this was happening. I would want to be assured that I would be ok. I would want explanation, plans, spread sheets and flow charts. Exactly how would all this work out.

To be sure, I have not been visited by an angel in a dream about anything (yet!), but I am hoping that my faith in God would be as strong as St. Joseph’s. To simply agree to the plan without any input, without a clear vision of what is expected and without a clear idea of what God wants is a pretty tall order for someone like me.

So, there is St. Joseph, standing as a faithful, quiet, protector of Mary and taking part in the plan of God by being faithful and standing by. I think there is something in that role for all of us. No need to be the hero at the front of the stage when it is God’s plan we are working with. In fact, sometimes quiet faithfulness is the way of the saints. Instead of being at the front of the story, Joseph takes his part and quietly moves to his place...behind the manger in the nativity play. From there he raises Jesus and teaches him and loves him and his mother. As plans go, that was a very good one.

Advent 4: Mary and Joseph Visit Bethlehem ~ Luke 2:1-7

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.

Reflection ~ Visit to Bethlehem

If you visit Bethlehem today, a walk through the bullet-pocked buildings which surround the general location of Jesus' birth doesn't conjure up happy Christmas scenes. As you eventually wind your way into and through interconnected, over-lapping Churches, very little feels familiar. Everything is enclosed, with stone floors, worn and polished by generations of pilgrims, and walls made dark by the smoke of thousands of candles. Not to mention the riot of oriental presence lamps with Christmas bulbs hanging from them.

When you finally come near to the sacred site, there is usually a long queue before you are able to climb down a short flight of steep stairs and through a narrow, arched portal. You wait a bit longer in a crowded vestibule and then proceed into a small, dimly lit cave. It takes a moment for you to realize that you now stand in the site revered by countless pilgrims as the place where Mary gave birth to the Christ-child: the Grotto of the Nativity.

It is at first hard to connect this tapestry-walled, lamp-lit place with the picture of Luke's stable you have carried in your mind for years—and the sensation is not entirely comfortable. But as you gaze at the small, ornate altar which stands above the sacred spot, a sense of holy peace and reverence begins to grow in you; and when everyone starts to sing *Away in a Manger*, you join in, and the feeling of disconnect between what you had expected and what you are seeing and feeling falls away completely. Your heart begins to fill with the eternally familiar warmth of Christ.

When it is your turn to kneel down at the altar, you look across a marble surface into a small opening set in an intricately embossed silver star that lies over the spot where the infant Jesus is believed to have been born—you feel compelled to follow the tradition of countless pilgrims, and you allow your hand to reach in and touch the ancient, smooth stone.

In the close comfort of the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you remember what matters most as we prepare for Christmas: the God of all time and space came to us in love and great gentleness, and in simplicity, calling us to find our truest selves by following the way of Jesus.

+Shane: Ottawa

Christmas Day: Shepherds Visit the New-Born Jesus

~ Luke 2:7-20

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. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Reflection ~ Shepherds Visit the New-Born Jesus

For years I have wondered whether the Christmas Eve sermons I faithfully and diligently prepared have been of any consequence at all.

Now don't get me wrong, I don't regret for one second the preparation time spent reflecting on Luke's account of the Nativity of our Lord, or allowing myself with the help of the Holy Spirit, and carols and candles, and Christ incarnate in bread and wine to proclaim the, "good news of great joy for all people – to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2: 10-11)

But I often wondered when it was all over, whether it was the sermon, or the simplicity of the church lit up with the sound of voices singing in unison that drew the congregation into that heavenly peace because the Saviour of the world is born.

"Now it is Christmas," the frail elderly would whisper at the end of the Sunday school pageant – even though the costumes looked a little worse for wear and the angels forgot the few words they had to remember. "Now it is Christmas," worshippers would say leaving the sanctuary after we'd sung that final glorious hymn, "Joy to the World." "Now it is Christmas," the outreach team would declare when the last turkey had been delivered to a family in need.

There is a hungering for Christmas in our world. There is a hungering for good news in a world that is filled with all the political posturing of the Roman Empire in first century. So.....I wonder if there is a word that has the power to startle us in the way that the angel's announcement startled the shepherds?

Reading Luke's account of the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Shepherds, I realized that Luke nods briefly towards emperors, governments, laws and world orders. But then he turns away from religious as well as political power to tell the world of God's saving purpose in the birth of a bawling infant born.

The Word wasn't made known in a church. The Saviour of the world was born in a cave to a peasant couple. The angel's announcement of the fulfillment of prophecy isn't made in a temple but goes to some riff raff shepherds living in the fields.

Perhaps the word the world needs to hear this Christmas is that ***Jesus is being born where people need him most.*** This is why Jesus is found in the giving and sharing of meals, in the joy of a pageant, in a communal expression of voices united, in gift giving, and carols and candles. But Jesus is also found in the fields of the lonely and isolated, in a good word spoken to the disenfranchised and the forgotten, in those who have all but given up on him, and in our own painful places of spiritual wilderness.

May Jesus be born where you need him most of all this Christmas.

+Anne: Algoma

Epiphany: Eastern Seers Visit the Holy Child

~ Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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 Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired 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:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection ~ Visit from the Eastern Seers

In the 1980s I was the first rector of The Church of the Epiphany and Saint Mark in the Diocese of Toronto. One day I was in the hardware store getting a few necessary things for the church and looked to charge the items to our account. 'What's the name of the account?' the clerk asked, The Church of the Epiphany and... 'Wait a minute' he said 'the Church of what? Epiphany-E-P-I-P-H-A-N-Y. What's that?' he asked with a quizzical look on his face.

I was going to give him a theological lesson about the word and its meaning about an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being but thought better of it. 'Do you remember' I said, 'in the Christmas story when the three wise men come to see the child Jesus.' To my relief he said 'yes, I do remember that', and I said, 'great that's the epiphany.'

I dare say that the wisemen's visit to the child Jesus is a somewhat simpler title than Epiphany. The story in Matthew 2:1-12 is filled with mystery. We don't know for sure that there were three wisemen - the Bible doesn't say. We don't know what country they came from. We don't know when they first spotted the star or what made them follow it. There is however one thing, that we can be certain of, and it comes from verse 12 and it is the last nine words that we hear.

“they left for their own country by another road.”

Some may think this an insignificant closing line, but I beg to differ. The wise men, having followed the star that led them to the Christ child, receive divine guidance in a dream. The path leading them back to their own country will be by a different road. This simple yet noteworthy detail speaks to the transformative nature of encountering Christ. To put it simply, meeting the child Jesus in perhaps the humblest of settings changed their hearts and their lives.

No matter where we are on our Christian journey there will be epiphany moments- times where we encounter Christ in a new way. The challenge will be for us to leave by a different road. That road may reshape our perspectives priorities and our path. There will be things that we will need to leave behind to embrace the new road- a route shaped by the teachings and love of our Saviour, the one marked by a profound love.

God's redirection of the magi was by divine design. May we, like the magi, be open to the Holy Spirit and willing to leave by a different road as we continue to follow the beckoning call of the Christ child in our lives.

Canon Paul Feheley, Executive Director of AFP



Prayer for Christmas

"Lord, be with your people wherever they find themselves this Christmas. Fill their hearts with a longing and a love for you and for humankind, and inspire them to sing continually of your joy. Amen"

+Anne: Algoma



Archbishop Anne's Motto for 2024

"...God loves a cheerful giver."

~ 2 Corinthians 9:6-11



Anglican Fellowship of Prayer (Canada)

Anglican Fellowship of Prayer resources can be found on-line at

www.anglicanprayer.org

YouTube @anglicanfellowshipofprayer5101

Resources include: pamphlets on prayer for printing, teaching videos about prayer, a place to send in prayer requests, and a link to our monthly APF Zoom broadcast "Let Us Pray", <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84453751334>, which is held on the 1st Monday of each month at 1 pm EST.