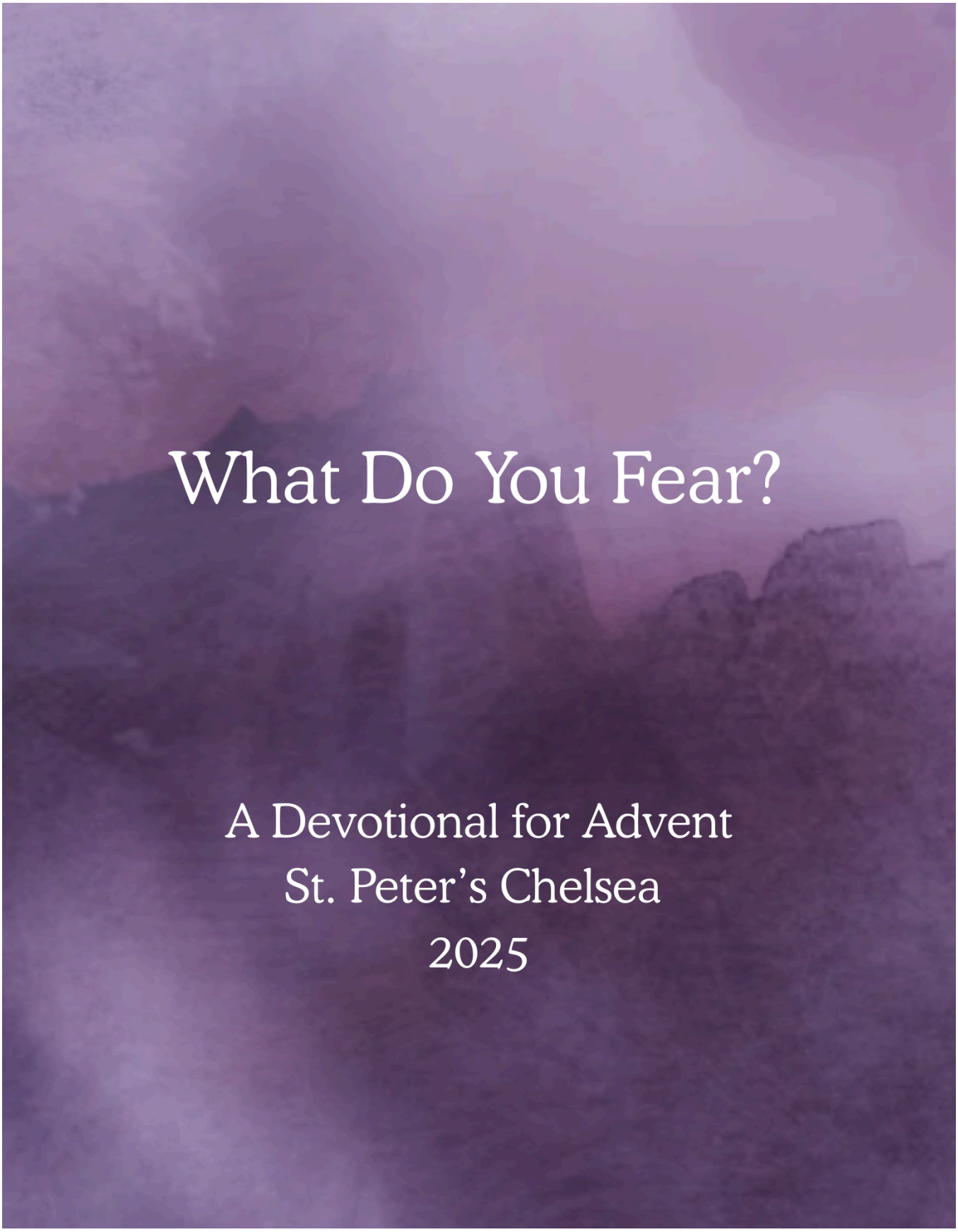

What Do You Fear?

A Devotional for Advent
St. Peter's Chelsea
2025

The First Sunday of Advent

Written by Mina Leazer

I called on your name, O Lord,
from the depths of the pit;
you heard my plea, "Do not close
your ear to my cry for help!"
You came near when I called on you;
you said, "Do not fear!"
-Lamentations 3:55-57

In this week's advent passage, I am struck by the deep longing and waiting that arises out of desperate need. The chapter enfolding Jeremiah's plea to the Lord in Lamentations is filled with dark desolation in response to the destruction of Jerusalem. David's prayer in Psalm 27 comes at the heels of deathly pursuit by his literal enemies bent on the destruction of this body. Even Zechariah's encounter with an actual angel of the Lord is steeped in the grief of his wife Elizabeth's infertility and reckoning with the impossibility of bearing children at their age - the death of a dream.

Admittedly, every advent season, I am lulled by the pretty lights, warm cider, and cozy scent of pine, so these images of darkness, death, and desperation seem far from the happy portrait of an approaching Christmas. But if I dare open my gaze a touch farther, I realize that it's because I am afraid to embody a larger aching world. What will it cost me? How much do I have to give of my time, my heart, and my resources?

Last night, I witnessed a barefooted soul experiencing a crisis in the midst of the bustling streets of the West Village. They cried for help with such desperation, and yet no one in the immediate vicinity seemed to sense the same danger. When their cries went unheard, this person proceeded to lie down in the crosswalk so that the approaching cars had to nimbly weave around them on the narrow street. No one stopped, including me.

As we move into an age of self-soothing algorithms and creature comforts at the tap of a button, my fear is that we will insulate ourselves from deep desperation of a world the savior came to save. The subversiveness of God's plan, to plant in Elizabeth the whisper of John who would become the mouthpiece of Jesus's arrival to the confoundment of an empire led by a king who would seek to destroy this very plan…is revolutionary.

Perhaps these dim glimpses of humanity seem far from us, but I assure you that they are all around us. This season, families will be torn asunder by evil regimes who deem human lives to be "illegal." Inhabitants of this present time live in countries that have been decimated to rubble and dust as they long for warmth, for a home. Loneliness haunts our society which is now turning to the comforts of AI to soothe the deep ache of their hearts. This is the world that waits for hope, for light, for love.

Reflection:

1. What would it look like to take on the collective plea on behalf of those who suffer?
2. What does embodiment look like to stand in the shoes of those in need?

The Second Sunday of Advent

Written by Ally Bergman

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.
-Isaiah 43:19-21

In her 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson writes about two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, whose aunt Sylvie comes to live with them after years of living transiently, outdoors. Comfortable with the dark, Sylvie has a proclivity for leaving indoor lights off to let daylight alone illuminate the house. "Evening was her special time of day," says Ruth. "I think she liked it so well for its tendency to smooth, to soften. She seemed to dislike the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness." Sylvie is not afraid of the dark, and does not think of her house as a stronghold against it. Instead, "She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude."

Perhaps this Advent we feel ourselves to be sunk in the various darknesses we wish to exclude from our lives—darkness of spirit; the darkness of hopelessness, fatigue, or despair; the darkness of not knowing the road ahead. Yet living in the dark is what this season requires of us: darkness curls close in these short, winter days, sprawling across our mornings and our evenings.

In Advent, we await the coming of a God who surprises us by choosing to be sunk in the very human elements of our lives. God is not afraid of the dark; instead, God keeps house like Sylvie. In *Housekeeping*, I see a picture of what it might look like to await this God. Robinson writes the fading of light to dark to light again and again across the book, attending to its stunning transformations of shadow, depth, and color. In the dark, the sisters and Sylvie learn "proximity with our finer senses"; Sylvie and the sisters notice darkness in its all blues and greys and silvers; they hear the insect choruses that emerge in it; they allow their sensory worlds to be remade by it.

And then, light comes: "The absolute black of the sky dulled and dimmed and blanched slowly away, and finally half a dozen daubs of cloud, dull powder pink, sailed high in a pale-green sky, rust-red at the horizon," writes Robinson in one (especially dazzling) scene. We are not submerged in darkness forever: it yields. Light comes. But when it does, we are not the same.

As darkness continues to edge our days, enveloping us each morning and evening, so Advent allows us, every year, to return to our being remade in the dark. In Advent we find the unformed places of our faith; we hush and still to attend to the things we could not perceive in the light. In our waiting, the dark reattunes us. Like the early, uncertain disciples of Jesus's day who asked "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3), we are perhaps unsure what light will look like when it does come. So we sit in the dark, our eyes sharpening to the gentle

illuminations it yields. In the dark, we wait for the light. *See, I am doing a new thing!* Our senses change. *Now it springs up*; the God who is not afraid of darkness meets us, joins us in it—makes, in a humble stable, his house. *Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

May we sit in the darkness long enough to perceive what God has for us here. May the darkness tune our senses to the new things God is doing.

Reflection:

1. What kinds of darkness or uncertainty do you find yourself in this Advent season? Can you practice—in prayer, in writing, or in speaking aloud—being honest with God or with others about what you fear in that darkness?
2. In what parts of your day are you most aware of physical darkness this winter? (The early morning? When you are coming home from work?) How might you practice more stillness in those parts of your day, inviting God's presence in?

The Third Sunday of Advent

Written by Meg Becker

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."
"Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."
-Jeremiah 1:4–10

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and night wraps itself around me,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
-Psalm 139: 1–12, 23–24

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, favored 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 favor 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 forever, 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. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.

-Luke 1:26-39

As people on this earth, we are no strangers to fear. We all live daily with fears big and small—for our world, our loved ones, ourselves. We know that God is good, but we still grapple with the reality of the world we're in, the *not yet*.

The passages this week focus on people who are no strangers to it, either. Jeremiah proclaims that he is too young to do what God is asking of him; Mary is troubled at Gabriel's arrival and what it could mean; David asks God to search his anxious thoughts.

God responds to both Jeremiah and Mary with assurance. In Jeremiah 1:8, the Lord says "'Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.'" And to Mary, one of the first things Gabriel says to her is "'The Lord is with you.'" (Luke 1:28). God sees their fear, and does not shame them or ignore it. Rather, He addresses it by giving them the gift and peace of His constant presence and help. They have not, and will not, be doing what is asked of them alone. In response, we see Jeremiah and Mary both say *yes* to what He is calling them to. Despite their fear and the unknowns, they choose to trust in what God is calling them to and equipping them for.

We see these promises further echoed in Psalm 139 as David prays. Throughout these verses, he reflects on God's omnipotence and presence alongside His protection, strength, and goodness. There is nowhere that we can go that God is not watching over us, or is unaware of what we're going through. In short, there is no place that fear reaches that God cannot. After all: "darkness is as light to you." (Psalm 139:12).

Fear can often feel like darkness, just like night can often feel unending this time of year. I can't help but see that as intentional and poetic, especially as the winter's chill sets in, and we need warmth and comfort even more. The light—when we finally celebrate Jesus coming on Christmas Day—is all the brighter for the anticipation we feel leading up to it.

Just as God was with Jeremiah, Mary, and David, He is with us through all our fears large and small. I pray that we are able to find peace and are equipped with these truths this week.

Reflection:

1. What fears are heavy on your heart this week?
2. What is God saying in response to those fears?

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Written by Stefanie Peters

Do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you; I will help you;
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
-Isaiah 41:10

My favorite time to pray is while out for a walk. A few months ago, I was finishing a long walk when I asked God, "Do you have anything to say to me?" And these words immediately came to mind: "Do not be afraid."

I have wrestled with those words over the past few months. "Do not be afraid" and similar phrases appears over one hundred times in Scripture, one of them in the reading for today. I wonder whether this command occurs so frequently in the Bible is because it is so very human to fear. None of us are free from fear's hold on our hearts. For me, fear often shows up in a scarcity mentality—worries about the future, about taking risks and trying new things, about my job, about my health, about being alone—and in general anxiety about what others think of me, of being judged or underestimated, of being misunderstood. Fear folds me in on myself, so that I worry so much about my own well-being that I cannot look up and around to care about the well-being of others.

In Isaiah 41, Israel is in exile in Babylon. The Israelites' homes and cities had been destroyed, and then they had been forcibly marched to Babylon to live under the continuing oppression of a powerful foreign empire. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem—the place where Israel's God was supposed to dwell—would have felt like God had abandoned them. Now they had been living as aliens in a foreign land for years. And yet, having seemingly lost everything, God chose that moment to say to Israel: "Do not fear."

"Do not fear," he said, but then he added an explanation: "for I am with you."

This was not a promise to the Israelites that God would fix everything, restore the Temple, restore their homes, restore their sovereignty. That did not happen. Neither is this verse a promise for us that none of our fears will ever occur, that we will never experience pain or difficulty or death. Of course we will. Jesus promises us "In this world, you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

But when I can remember that God is with me, that He came into the world in Jesus and is coming again—the past and future that we both remember and hope for in Advent—then it does not seem to matter so much what my fears for the future are. I could lose my job tomorrow, I could get a difficult diagnosis, I could lose my life, and I would still be okay, for God is with me. Furthermore, remembering that God is with me helps me to look up and around me, and instead of fearing for my own well-being, to seek out ways to care for the well-being of the people around me. That, after all, is what love is, the theme of this week of Advent. And because God first loved us, we are able to love others.

Reflection:

1. What would you do if you were not afraid?
2. Lord, do you have anything to say to me today?

The First Sunday After Advent

Written by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet:
"Out of Egypt I called my son."

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord 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 trying to take the child's life are dead."
So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.
-Matthew 2: 13-15, 19-23

I like being home. If I have to travel for work, it's rarely for more than a couple of days; any longer, and both my cat, who is used to being my sounding board every day, and I, are wholly out of sorts. I enjoy my own company.

Maybe my affinity for staying home is rooted in all the moving that I've done in life. Particularly in my childhood, where I was so often the New Kid that I became very good at it – planning my identity in each new school, scoping out friend groups, and integrating myself into each little culture. I spent much of my life leaving homes and entering new ones. At this point, I feel like I've earned the right to Stay Home.

I used to pay little attention to Joseph in the Christmas story. The drama, the *work,* the magnifying of the Lord – Mary had that on lock. Joseph was an old guy who had to keep getting up and moving his family from one place to another, and then didn't get a whole lot of shine later on. But one day, in conversation with my youth group of mostly 8th graders, we spent a little time talking about what kind of man he must have been – even when he was of a mind to leave his wife suddenly "pregnant by the Holy Spirit," he was sensitive enough to plan to do it quietly and privately, so as not to embarrass her. He got points for that. Most of all, we talked about his dreams, and how they took him to unexpected places.

Frequently guided in his dreams by an angel of the Lord, Joseph sounds like he probably didn't go to bed overstuffed with his own lists and plans for the days ahead. Much of the language describing a faithful life is about preparation, and I think many of us, including myself, take that to mean being perpetually *in training*. In *staying ready so we don't have to get ready*. In not being the ones caught out there without a flame in our lamps. At some points in my life it means being aggressively churchy, adorning my days with official rituals and traditions, *doing* faith. It often means making plans and sticking to schedules – and being hugely disappointed in myself when those plans unravel.

These days I go to sleep mostly looking to get enough rest so that I can do the things that I've decided I need to do the next day. Often, I wake up tired, and don't remember my dreams, of if I had any at all. *What would it mean if I sought more than rest?* What if I went to bed hoping to be visited by an angel of the Lord? Honestly, the idea is more than a little frightening. And while Joseph was

clearly abundantly blessed (baby Jesus, the Son of God was his kid, etc. etc.), the messages from God in those dreams was far from easy. Did he hesitate when he woke up? Did he think *that's not at all what I was expecting*? What we do know is that he lived in such a state of...*abiding*, I guess, that he followed that Word into the unknown, away from home -- and was welcomed Home, each time.

As a child, I didn't have a choice. When it was time to move, I had to pack up my books and my Legos and go. And each New Kid experience included blessed surprises – new friendships, unexpected self-discoveries, becoming a new self outside of my plans, in a way that only happened because I'd left one home to figure out how to make myself at home somewhere else.

Emmanuel, God is with us *all* in exactly the way we each need. So often, when we come outside of ourselves and everything we know and plan, we forget that we don't recognize the way God is working in another's life, and can focus on the fact that we're all a part of God's beloved community. Maybe, when we hear God's call to leave home, to go outside of ourselves and everything we know and plan, we will be both comforted and challenged in gloriously new and unexpected ways. Maybe how God is with someone new, how God shows up in a new place, helps us find the Home we didn't even know we needed. And we can stay there, for a while, until He tells us to move on. And God will lead us Home, again.

In this time after Christmas, after the waiting of Advent, not yet at Epiphany, I remind myself that I'm not "ready." I don't have to spend all my time getting ready. I can, and maybe should, rest in this itchy space of not knowing, of not doing, of abiding so deeply that my listening is not even active, it just *is*. Maybe I'll sleep better if I don't try so hard.

Reflection:

1. When did you last feel God's call to leave 'home'? What did you do, and how did that work out?