



Arise

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Advent hope for us and our country

Editors note: This was written a year ago with a few slight revisions. It is still appropriate today.

May we reflect on how these traditional Advent themes speak to the present crisis in our country: Being prepared and vigilant for whatever might come; purifying and cleansing ourselves by entering the refiner's fire; always remaining hopeful that God will bring us out of our darkness into his wonderful light; opening the eyes of our faith to recognize Emmanuel who is always *God with us*.

First Reflection: "You must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." Matt 24: 37-44 / First Sunday of Advent

On the first day of our new liturgical year we are always reminded to be vigilant; to be prepared for any eventuality in life on a daily basis because we never know what the next moment will bring. We could have a heart attack or an auto accident. We could lose our income. Be prepared.

Our national debt is so high that a day of reckoning is surely coming. Be prepared. Many middle class Americans are one paycheck away from financial disaster. We have so pampered our children that they will be ill-prepared to deal

with such hardship. And yet we continue to keep running up our credit card debts. A day of reckoning is coming. Be prepared.

If we don't learn to live with our enemies, we will end up in World War III, which will be nuclear free-for-all, with the assurance that all of our daughters and sons will go to war and we just might destroy a third of the planet. Be prepared.

Lord Jesus, you call us to be always vigilant, to be so reflective of our lives that we are always prepared for whatever life will bring. Help us to teach our children this essential lesson of life: To take nothing in life for granted and be prepared for whatever life will bring.

Second Reflection: "At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins."

Matthew 3:1-12 / Second Sunday of Advent

In this Scripture we note that it was a powerful time of grace and conversion when Jesus entered the world. People were ready and willing to acknowledge their sins and change their lives.

Another important Scripture about conversion is appropriate for our times:

"Lo, I am sending my messenger before me. . . But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire or the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying [silver] and he will purify the sons of Levi, refining them like gold and silver that they may offer due sacrifices to the Lord."

Malachi 3:1-5.

Every human being will stand before God for each one's particular judgment. Each of us must think about that day and what the Lord will see in us. No thought, no word, no deed of ours will be hidden from God. Each of us must claim our souls.

Our nation must also enter the refiner's fire. Who among us will abide the day of his coming? Will I? Will you? Will George Bush? Barack Obama? The pastor of your parish? Our bishops? Islamic extremists?

There is nothing like suffering and hardship to cleanse and purify us. It takes us back to the essentials of life. When everything is going well we tend to take home, job, spouse, children, health for granted. We take God for granted too. When everything is going well we may feel we don't need God so much. We may stop thanking him. Stop acknowledging that everything we have is God's gift. We may succumb to the illusion of self-reliance that we no longer need God that much. We have a tendency to resign God to the periphery of our lives. I notice this on Sunday mornings when so many of us only half-heartedly enter into praise and thanksgiving. So what we need right now in our country is a good dose of hardship to bring us to our knees, to make us stop and think, to get our lives back on track.

Right after 9/11 I wrote in *Arise*, "our nation is being given the opportunity to undergo such a purifying and cleansing process as well." But we did not take that opportunity. We have a tendency to blame others. This is the time to look into ourselves.

As we move forward to transform our country in this season of hope 2008–2009,

I think our first task is to reach across lines that separate us and build bonds of love instead of walls of division in our own country and in relation to our enemies. We must reach out to our neighbors who are at risk in this economic crisis. But there is hope as we prepare for a new season of American government. But each of us must do our part. The work of entering the refiner's fire in our own lives still needs to be done. Most people I talk to agree that our nation is in crisis, but few seem to ask God what each of us needs to do in the face of it. The question is will we see this Advent as an opportunity for us to change our own lives for the better. I continue to insist: the transformation of our country depends on our own personal renewal.

In the church, hardly anyone goes to confession these days, except in those parishes where there is excellent preaching about the need for ongoing conversion and transformation of our lives. So, as I always do, I invite you to look at your own complicity with sin and make a good confession to purify your hearts for the coming celebration of Christmas.

The closer Jesus allows me to come to him the more I realize that I need his grace and mercy on a daily basis to keep loving and hopeful in an uncaring world.

Lord Jesus, have mercy on us for our refusal OF love, our refusal TO love, our refusal to grow and our refusal to give thanks. Help us never to accept the status quo of our lives or our nation. Help us realize that truly leading a Christian life means a willingness to enter a path of ongoing conversion of heart, always willing to change our lives from hate to love, from self-centeredness to compassion, from materialism to simplicity of life. Help us realize that, again and again, we must come back to your love. May we ready our hearts to receive you anew this Christmas and every day of the year.

Third reflection: From darkness to light.

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has
come,

the glory of the Lord shines upon you.

See the darkness covers the earth,

and thick clouds cover the peoples;

and over you appears his glory.

Nations shall walk by your light,

and kings by your shining radiance.

(Isaiah 60:1-6)

There has always been much darkness in the world. There is gloom and fear and worry and uncertainty in many people's lives as we come into Christmas 2008. But on one starry night two thousand years ago THE LIGHT entered the world. And we have become children of the light. We must believe in the light and say NO to darkness wherever it presents itself.

We need to transform our negative thoughts into positive energy; we need to always and everywhere resist the darkness of consumerism and violence that invades our living rooms and our hateful words to our spouse or our children; we need to refuse to hate no matter what and overcome our fears and prejudices with understanding; we need to turn our cynicism and despair into hope; we need to say

NO to the culture of death from abortion to war to capital punishment and YES to life; we need to turn away from a war economy to investing in renewable energy technologies and invest in the development of the peoples of the earth; we need to face the decay and decline in our country and see it as a wonderful opportunity to restore America's greatness.

Yes, we need to believe that Jesus is still our Light; that, as we turn toward that light, that our whole world will be transformed into light.

The message of Christmas can challenge us to see the beauty and wonder around us. The wonder is my darkness is being transformed. I see beauty everywhere from the long shadows cast by the orange afternoon light to the many moods of the ocean as Shivvy and I hit the beach at sunrise last year in St. Augustine. Here in Lauderdale the foam of the ocean is replaced by the constant spectacle of myriad cloud formations sailing across the blue ocean above. The great live oaks and twisted scrub oak of north Florida are replaced by hundreds of varieties of palm trees and tropical flowers.

So I call you to prayer and conversion this Advent. Be not discouraged about your life. The Light can penetrate your darkest hour. Get out of the fast lane. slow down your life; live a simpler life. Be transformed by the beauty and wonder around you. Open your eyes and those of your children to notice that Emmanuel is indeed God with us still. Curb your cynicism and believe once again in the miracle of Christmas, every day of the year.

Let God transform your life as our Lord and our Lady are doing for me. And pray daily for the transformation of our beloved country. Have a wonderful Christmas.

The Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we have seen his glory:
the glory of an only Son coming from the Father,
filled with enduring love. (*John 1:1-18*)

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