

A RADICAL ADVENT

Light Where Hope Falters



Gritty Hope

*“It’s like we’re sitting in the dark and we don’t know it.
Like we’re hidden behind a veil, and we don’t know it.
Just like a baby in the womb, they don’t know there’s more,
There’s more than just the darkness.”*

Misty Edwards, “Womb of the Morning,”

As Advent begins, join us in reflecting on the cosmic effects of the Incarnation, and consider what it looks like for Light to break in where hope falters.

For our neighbors who live on the streets, night-time poses a particular danger. At night, even one’s usual “safe place” can become the site of theft, harm and abuse. Without four walls to keep watch in the darkness, night time reveals our deepest vulnerabilities. Even for those who enjoy the protection a home with locked doors affords, darkness can still be a time of danger. In the night, our deepest anxieties and regrets come swarming into our thoughts and minds leaving us with little rational ability to fight off our fears. Advent – this time of year set aside in anticipation, waiting for the Light to come – reminds us that we all live the vulnerability of darkness year round. This darkness, both real and metaphorical, keeps us from seeing as clearly as we should.

As Hebrews 11:1 reminds us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

WEEK 1

Faith is the anticipation of something that is not yet fully present.

Isn't this reality acutely true for the suffering? For the friend whose young husband has just died of cancer as she falls asleep on an empty bed? For the lonely youth who finds himself living on the street because he has no one to turn to for support?

In the darkness of the pain of human existence, we hope for more. In the darkness of the journey, we long for something more than just the "Christmas spirit." As we age and experience the losses of time, a few thoughtful gifts cannot erase-

the deep ache for the world we watch on the news,
the empty seat for a deceased parent at the dinner table,
the suicide victim sister who would have been at the wedding,
the estranged friend who won't be sending a Christmas card,
the single mother who doesn't have enough money for a card,
the child who will not make the effort to come to this year's festivities and
the child for whom despair has turned to gripping addiction.

As we enter this Advent together, may we listen for the echoes of a better reality and pay close attention to the shadows of light that can be found even in the darkest of places. There is always more than what meets the eye. Like in the haunting woodcut by Fritz Eichenberg at the start of this devotional, there is a presence among us that changes everything. Even if we cannot see him yet, he's coming, he has come, and he will come again.

This is our chosen hope, and the hope that chooses us.

Lean In and Learn

In September 2023, **87,907** people were homeless in New York City, including **31,510** homeless children.

The number of single adults who experience homelessness is **106 percent higher** than it was 10 years ago.

Between **25,000** and **35,000** people are homeless on any given night in Canada.

In Mexico, **36 percent** of the population lives below the subsistence level. In light of the global migration crisis patterns, the mobile immigrants in Mexico are being cared for and hosted by mostly others who are poor and many of whom are followers of Christ.

*"The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone."*

Isaiah 9:2, ESV

WEEK 1

A Note about the M25i Advent Artist

Fritz Eichenberg was one of the world's master wood engravers, especially renowned for his illustrations of the Russian literary classics including works by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. In 1949 he met Dorothy Day, the charismatic co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who asked him to donate his talents to The Catholic Worker newspaper. Thus began a collaboration of forty years duration, beautifully represented in these pieces highlighted for M25i Advent.

Eichenberg was born a Jewish man in Germany in 1901. After his training and successful vocation as an artist, he fled Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933, traveling first to Guatemala and Mexico and then through Texas to New York. In 1940, after the death of his wife, he became a Quaker. His spiritual life was nourished by both his Quaker shaped faith and his friendship with Catholics who loved and lived as Jesus did. His proximity to the poor in New York and friendship with Dorothy Day fueled his art and vision of what it looked like to love God in authentic gospel impact. He fought for peace through his art and depicted a God close to suffering bringing hope.

**“With certain convictions, your path,
no matter how thorny, is laid out for you,
and you have to follow,
even if your tender feet object.”**

Fritz Eichenberg

Contended Peace

*“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.”*

Isaiah 11:6-8

War is eminent on many of our minds this Christmas. What do we long for in the dark days of faith when our hope falters? Ask a stranger at the grocery store or the park what they hope for and you're likely to get something along the lines of “peace.”



Fritz Eichenberg, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1950, wood-cut

WEEK 2

One wonders if this answer isn't all that different from the answer one of Mary or Joseph's friends might have given in first century Palestine.

Why is this our cry? What is at the heart of our desire for peace?

Since the start of time, one of the deepest human longings has been to belong to someone, some place, some people, without the fear of that belonging being violently contested or stripped away. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their perfect "shalom" – their flourishing – was dependent on the fact that they belonged in harmony to God, to each other and to the Earth. There was no pain of separation or loss of that belonging until they sinned and their relationships to God, each other and the earth were fractured.

Return your gaze to today's Fritz Eichenberg's woodcut. The heart of the image and Scripture passage gets right at the human longing for peace. One day soon "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" and "the nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra."

These things are not possible in the fractured world we inhabit. In this world, wolves devour lambs and cobras kill children. In this world, over 100 million people are forcibly-displaced worldwide by the deadly forces of violence and hatred. This world knows what is to have been battered and bruised by human selfishness, so much so that the very seas threaten to drown our cities and wildfires bring hell to life.

Lean In and Learn

1. Read the [*M25i Whitepaper*](#) on **The Principles and Practices of Peacemaking**.

We encourage you to print it out and keep it near to review and pray through multiple times, praying through the contexts of un-peace, trouble, brokenness, division that weigh on you.

2. Fuller Center for Spiritual Formation has created Advent prayer resources engaging the practice of breath prayers. Enjoy this beautiful and simple content, if you are drawn to this form of prayer practices of peace. Click [HERE](#) to download them.

WEEK 2

What if followers of Christ flooded service and medical professions (social workers, counselors, nurses, advocates, child welfare workers) and some law enforcement (victim advocates, juvenile justice personnel) to have eyes and ears to "see" vulnerable populations they work with (homeless, runaway, sexual abuse, foster care, schools, ER, community clinics, etc) and shielded them from being trafficked and having violence done to them, or becoming victims of "death by despair" in suicide, homicide, and overdose? And what if every Anglican parish came alongside to offer support and gospel light?

In the darkness of this world, let us hold out Advent Hope in anticipation of the peace that brings reconciliation, restoration, and resurrection life. We contend for a peaceable kingdom, one where death holds no sway.

Reflection Questions

- Consider who may be a lamb among lions in your circles? Who might need prayer and protection because of their particular vulnerabilities?
- Where are the fractures you feel most deeply? Consider the four primary relationships: self, God, others, creation. Pray for peace.

“Where is God in war? God is under the rubble.”

Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

WEEK 3

Costly Joy

“We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.”

Excerpt from “A Brief For The Defense” by **Jack Gilbert**

This Sunday Anglicans across North America and beyond will light the Gaudete Candle, the only candle that breaks in color from the dark purples of Advent to a light shade of rose pink. Sunday marks the halfway point in the journey toward Christmas, offering a break in the dark clouds of night to the coming joy that will be revealed in Christ’s Incarnation.

The first week of Advent we contemplated the glimmers of hope in unusual places where Christ is found. Last week we considered our deep desire for peace in the chaos of this age. Today, let us reflect on the in-breaking of joy even in sorrow.

Where is joy?

Where do you see joy?

Where do you hear joy?

Taste joy?

Feel joy?

Maybe even smell joy?



WEEK 3

Consider the words of the poet: *“We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world. To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.”*

Joy, like the joy in the woman’s face in the sketch above by Fritz Eichenberg, pushes back the darkness and gives us glimpses of that endless joy to come. For Christians, joyful celebration (even of the little things) is an act of war. **In our joy, we declare that tragedy, violence, pain, and tears do not have the final word.**

The final word belongs to our King, the Lord of the Dance, the Bridegroom of the Feast!

Reflection Questions

- Who do you know that lives in deep joy? Would you expect them to be so joyful if you had never met them but read their life story in a newspaper or book?
- How is it that it is often the people facing life’s trickiest circumstances know a joy that is stronger than those who might seem to “have it together?”

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Rev. 21:4

Tangible Love

“From God’s viewpoint—and Satan’s—Christmas signals far more than the birth of a baby; it was an invasion, the decisive advance in the great struggle for the cosmos.”

Philip Yancey

Through Advent, we have considered the Light that breaks in where hope falters. If anything, this journey has made us ever more aware that human hope is weak. How easy is it to find yourself questioning if the violence, the scarcity, the poverty, the suffering is all that remains? We look at images of war, of children covered in blood and dust, cars and their passengers burned from the inside, and we think that surely this must be the way the world ends.

But Light, THE Light, breaks in. Even here. Even now. Into our weakened hope, the Light of the world pushes back the cosmic darkness. He enters in. His arms encircle the dust-covered child, his love baptizes our burned-out realities with life afresh.

In Advent we long for his coming. At Christmas we remember that we are not alone in the darkness. With the birth of Christ, God’s Word, his promise of ultimate renewal, was made flesh. With the sound of his first baby cries, Love himself became incarnate.

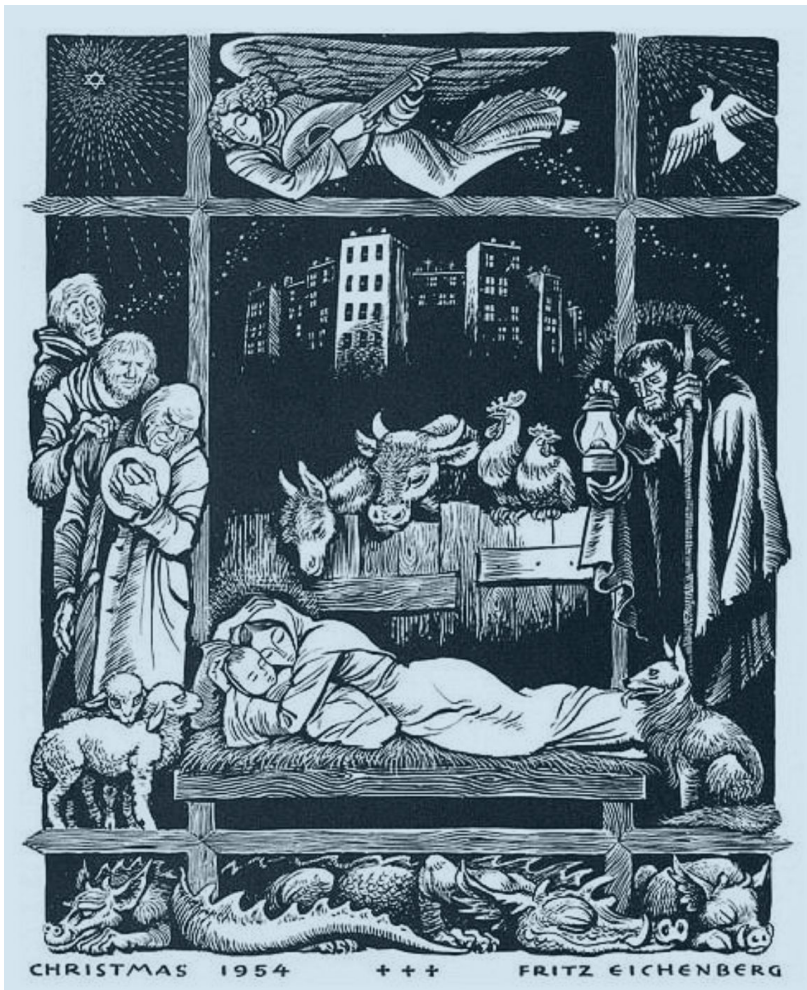
On Christmas, the war against the darkness really begins. Christ the King comes to us, his weary band and he invites out of our self-pity and into the Spirit-filled hope of life, life abundant, life eternal. This fractured, fragile world is given (and it is a gift) a new hope.

WEEK 4

Look at Fritz Eichenberg's nativity, Christmas 1954. In this image, the angels sing. The dove flies over the sleeping mother and child and the star of David shines over the happy scene. Joseph welcomes the visiting worshipers even as he keeps watch in the night with the cows, sheep and hens.

But what lurks beneath the floorboards? See the three sleeping dragons?

Danger is present in this scene. It is not the scene of complete and utter safety. Instead, it is a scene of holy presence. Christ the King of Heaven dwells with us in the darkness. At his coming, we are no longer alone. Light has come - and this gives us deep, precious hope.



“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

John 1:14,16, ESV

WEEK 4

Merry Christmas from all of us at the Matthew 25 Initiative!

No matter where you find yourself on this holy day, may you know the presence of Christ, the Light of the World.

You are not alone. Our God is a Not-Alone-God in Christ

Lean In and Learn

Read the [M25i Whitepaper](#) on the cosmic effects of an Incarnational life in Christ.

Reflection Questions

- Presence is powerful. It can change the tides, holding back waves of fear by the power of love. 1 John 4:18 reads: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”
- Where do you see, taste, feel, hear, smell Christ’s presence this Christmas?

**"Help [us] to shatter this
darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling
dreams
Of sun!"**

Langston Hughes, *As I Grew Older*

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