

Toward the Light



Four Bible Studies for Advent

John Birch

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Cover picture: Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist 11C (Menologion of Basil II)

Introduction

Advent is the season of waiting, longing, and hope. It prepares us to celebrate Christ's first coming at Christmas while also teaching us to live with expectation for his return. The Church's Lectionary readings lead us through this journey, helping us see both our deep need for God and the sure promises of his salvation.

The movement of Advent begins with a call to wake up and watch for God's coming. It reminds us that the world is not as it should be, yet God has promised renewal. As the weeks unfold, the readings invite us to repentance and preparation, pointing us toward the coming of God's kingdom of peace and justice. They lift us into joy as we glimpse signs of God's restoring work - healing, freedom, and hope for the poor and broken-hearted. Finally, Advent assures us of God's presence through the promise of Immanuel - God with us.

This is the rhythm of Advent: from longing, to promise, to joy, to the assurance of God's nearness. It is not just a journey toward Christmas, but a journey deeper into faith. Along the way, we are invited to trust God's promises, to prepare our hearts, to look for signs of his kingdom, and to rest in the truth that in Christ, God has already drawn near.

For these studies I'm using readings from Psalms, Isaiah, and Matthew from Year A of the Lectionary.

How to use these studies: Each session includes a short reflection, questions for discussion, and a prayer. They can be used individually for personal devotion, or distributed within a group to share insights, deepen faith, and encourage one another. However you use them, let Advent shape your waiting into hope, your watching into faith, and your longing into joy in Christ.



The Journey Begins

Study One



Stefano di Giovanni, The Journey of the Magi, c.1434

Opening Psalm : A Pilgrim's journey

(Read Psalm 122)



*'I rejoiced with those who said to me,
Let us go to the house of the Lord.'* v.1)

Travelling is a recurring theme throughout the Advent story, whether it is Mary's visit to Elizabeth, or Joseph and Mary, the Magi and shepherds heading for Bethlehem.

Travelling in the expectation of hearing or seeing something special from God happens throughout the Bible and does not end with Advent as we are all travellers on a journey of faith.

Psalm 122 is one of several Songs of Ascents and may have been sung by pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem, perhaps as they climbed the fifteen steps of the temple during major festivals.

The writer pictures Jerusalem as a central meeting place for believers, and particularly the 'house of the Lord' where

God is worshipped. It was also central to the prosperity, peace, and security of its people, and therefore worthy of prayer for its future safety.

Jerusalem was also at the heart of Jesus' life and mission. Soon after his birth he was presented at the temple, and later he would teach, heal, and celebrate the Jewish festivals there. It was in Jerusalem that he shared the Last Supper, prayed in Gethsemane, was arrested, crucified, buried and resurrected. And it was there that the early church was born.

Q) How does your heart respond when you gather with other believers for worship?

Q) What parallels can you see between the unity of Jerusalem in this psalm and the unity of the church as the body of Christ?

Q) The psalmist prays for peace within the city's walls. What does it mean for us to pray for peace - not only for our communities but also for our own hearts?

Q) How might the church cultivate a greater joy and anticipation for times of worship and fellowship?

Walk in the light of the Lord

(Read Isaiah 2:1-5)



'Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."' (v.3)

Isaiah talked previously of a 'stubborn and rebellious nation' more interested in self than their God, yet here the message changes to one of hope, with every nation journeying to Mount Zion, the mountain of the Lord, seeking God's wisdom and peace so that they might 'walk in his paths.'

Readings such as this show Isaiah speaking of a universal religion, not competing with local gods such as Baal, but with a belief that here was the one true God, and because of this it was vital that the Israelites led by example both in their public and private life.

Reading this today, the world might seem a long way from the unity that Isaiah

speaks of. Indeed, it is easy to take the view that these words refer simply to 'the last days' and in so doing dismiss our own responsibility to see them fulfilled in any way now.

History does not speak well of nations coming together as in Isaiah's words, but the world should not define our faith. Believers are called to live out their faith today, as have so many in the past, so that today others might be inspired to begin their own journey of faith toward the one true God.

Q) We are a world of many religions (and none). When sharing our faith with other, what should be our approach?

Q) Isaiah calls the people to 'walk in the light of the Lord' (v. 5). What do you think it means, practically, to walk in God's light in your daily life?

Q) Where in your own life do you sense God inviting you to turn 'swords into ploughshares', transforming something destructive, or negative, into something fruitful?

Keep walking

(Read Matthew 24:36-44)



'So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.' (v .44)

This passage brings both a warning and a comfort. Jesus reminds us that no one knows the day or hour of his return and calls us to live faithfully in the tension of 'not knowing.' As it was in the days of Noah, life continues in its many and diverse ways, until the flood comes. The warning is to not be lulled into spiritual complacency by the rhythms of daily life.

For believers today it is about living with purpose.

Faith isn't a passive waiting room, but active discipleship. We are told to 'be ready,' not in fear, but in an expression of faith that is seen through our lives.

Whether we're advocating for justice in an unjust world, standing with refugees, or simply showing kindness to our neighbour, we embody the readiness Jesus describes in our individual journeys of faith.

The story of Noah reminds us that God provides a way of salvation for those who trust Him. In Christ, we already have our ark - our refuge and hope. The challenge is not to drift into spiritual sleep, but to stay alert, living with expectation and joy. Every moment of faithfulness becomes an act of preparation, as we wait for the day when our Lord returns.



Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat, Simon de Myle 1570

Q) Jesus says no one knows the day or hour of his coming - not even the angels. Why do you think God keeps this hidden?

Q) What does watchfulness look like in practice?

Q) Jesus compares his return to the days of Noah, when people were busy with ordinary life. What might it look like to be spiritually "asleep" in our world today?

'Advent is the beginning of the end, in all of us, of everything that is not Christ.'
(Thomas Merton)

'Advent is a journey towards Bethlehem. May we let ourselves be drawn by the light of God made man.' (Pope Francis)



A prayer

Lord Jesus,

You remind us that no one knows the hour of Your return, not even the angels in heaven. Yet You call us to live with watchful hearts and faithful hands.

In a world full of distractions, help us stay awake to Your presence and Your purpose. Teach us to build lives not on fear, but on love - lives that reflect Your justice, mercy, and truth.

Let our faith be active, our hope resilient, and our love generous.

Amen



Hope and Expectation

Study Two



Synopsis of Saint John the Baptist, 11C (Menologion of Basil II)

Opening Psalm : Amen and Amen

(Read Psalm 72:1-7,18-19)



*'May he be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth' (v. 6)*

This psalm opens with hope and expectation that the king might be powerfully blessed by God. The writer looks to a reign that defends the poor, upholds justice, and defeats oppressors. He hopes this wise monarch will remain a blessing for a long time, but in saying so may also be thinking about the length of the royal dynasty rather than an individual life.

Read today, these words reach beyond earthly monarchs and point us toward the coming Messiah.

This season of Advent is one of expectation, celebrating Christ's first coming as a child in Bethlehem, but also looking forward to the day He will come again. The psalm presents a

picture of abundance, with righteousness blossoming and peace enduring, and in our expectation, we are challenged not to sit quietly and wait but to live boldly and faithfully, speaking out for justice and peace, supporting the needy, and sharing God's love.

The psalm ends with a doxology, a short hymn of praise to the Lord who has done, and will continue to do, 'marvellous deeds' on behalf of his people, demonstrating his 'glorious name' to all the world. Then follows a double 'Amen' emphasising the truth of these words.

Q) What qualities of leadership highlighted in the psalm stand out to you, and how do they reflect the character of Christ?

Q) What does verse six say to you about the nature of God, and how it might be seen in human lives?

Q) What does it mean for justice to 'flourish' in our communities today, and how can we be part of that flourishing?

Q) How might this psalm shape our prayers for leaders and nations during the Advent season?

In that day

(Read Isaiah 11:1-10)



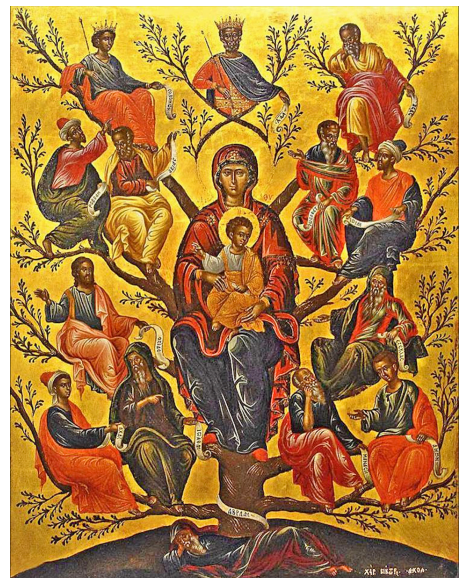
*'for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.'* (v. 9b)

In the previous chapter God's judgement had fallen on the Assyrians, and now, from the remnant of Israel's faithful people, there will come a shoot 'from the stump of Jesse', representing all that remained of the Davidic dynasty. It is a vision of hope springing from an unlikely source. What looked dead and finished shall become the source of new life.

For Israel, weary from exile and disappointment, this was a promise that God had not abandoned them. From a remnant, God would raise up a ruler filled with wisdom, justice, and the Spirit's power.

In Advent we hear this passage with Christ in view - the branch from Jesse's line who came in humility at Bethlehem. Jesus embodies the hope that Isaiah describes, defending the poor, bringing peace, and reconciling enemies. The wolf lying with the lamb and a little child leading them paints a world where violence, fear, and division shall be overcome.

In a world filled with conflict, this might seem almost unobtainable, but it is still a hope that can sustain us today, as in places of despair and brokenness God brings renewal and new shoots of life, if not through rulers, then in the lives of ordinary people standing up against injustice and sharing God's message of peace and love.



Victor of Crete (iconographer) Tree of Jesse c1674

Q) Where have you experienced God bringing renewal or hope in situations that felt cut off or hopeless?

Q) Not all communities seem to live together in harmony (as with the wolf and the lamb), but how can this be encouraged and supported?

Q) Advent invites us to live in hope while we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. What practices or attitudes help you remain hopeful and expectant, even in seasons of uncertainty?

Preparing the way

(Read Matthew 3:1-12)



*'A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'* (v. 3b)

In the region of the lower Jordan River valley, John the Baptist cries out, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Echoing Isaiah's words, John tells those gathering to hear him that they must prepare for something radically new, and calls for a baptism of repentance - not as an end in itself, but as a preparation for Jesus Christ, the One who will come with the Holy Spirit, fire, and renewal.

His words may seem severe, cutting away what is lifeless to make room for fresh growth, yet beneath this warning is a deep hope and expectation of something new: a promise that after so many

centuries of apparent silence, God is once more drawing near.

Advent teaches us to hold together both expectation and repentance. To repent is to turn around, to reorient our lives so we can welcome Christ's transforming presence. To expect is to live with trust that God's kingdom is near, even when wilderness surrounds us.

Like Israel waiting for the promised Messiah, we wait in hope that the Spirit will bring new life where we least expect.

The wilderness is not the end. From dry ground, a green shoot rises.

Q) John the Baptist calls people to 'prepare the way of the Lord.' What might it look like for local churches to embrace this call and encourage others to join them through Advent?

Q) Does the word 'wilderness' connect with society today, and how might transformation take place?

Q) What 'wilderness' voices are calling us to change today?



A prayer

Gracious God, in this season of waiting,
we open our hearts to your promise.
Prepare us by your Spirit
to welcome Christ with joy and with courage.
Where our lives feel like stumps,
bring forth new shoots of hope.
Turn us from all that hinders your life within us,
and keep us watchful for the coming of your kingdom.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.



The Way of Holiness

Study Three



Michelangelo Fresco of the Last Judgement c1540

Opening Psalm : Trust in the Lord

(Read Psalm 146:5-10)



*'Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.'* (v. 5)

The psalmist paints a striking image of God's character. Unlike human leaders, whose power fades, God remains forever faithful.

This is the One who made heaven and earth, who forever keeps his promises, defends the oppressed, provides for the hungry, comforts the weary, and loves the righteous (those living in accordance with God's will). We are shown a God whose reign is not marked by selfish power, as with so many earthly rulers, but by justice, mercy, and care for the vulnerable.

In Advent, we remember that this same God stepped into history through Jesus

– who embodied every trait described in this psalm. Christ did not arrive in royal splendour but in humility, to embrace the downtrodden, heal the sick and bring justice to the oppressed.

This passage roots us in hope: 'The Lord reigns forever.' Earthly powers rise and fall, but God's kingdom is unshakable. Advent is not only about remembering Christ's first coming, but also about longing for his return, when God's reign of justice and peace will be complete.

Until then, the challenge is to live in the light of his character - faithful, merciful, and unchanging.

Q) Which description of God's action (e.g., freeing prisoners, defending the oppressed) resonates most with you today?

Q) How does remembering God's unchanging character help us live with hope in uncertain times?

Q) The psalm ends with 'The Lord reigns forever.' How can this truth help us live faithfully in an uncertain world, as we wait for Christ's return?

The way of holiness

(Read Isaiah 11:1-10)

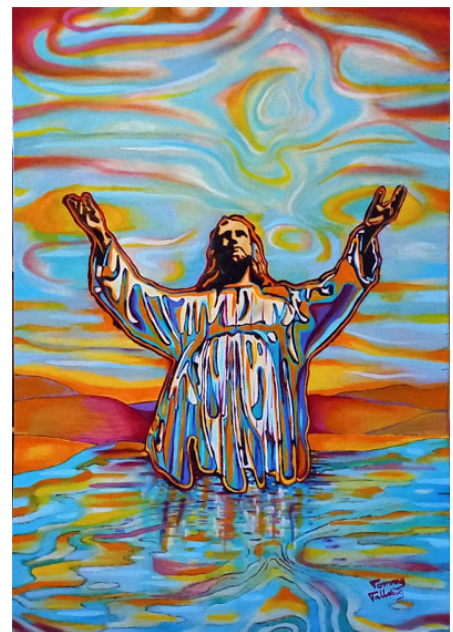


*"And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way." (v. 8)*

Isaiah brings us a vision of hope and restoration. The prophet describes deserts bursting into bloom, dry lands singing with joy, and weak hands strengthened. It is a picture of God's renewal—where sorrow, fear, and brokenness are replaced with joy, healing, and peace. For weary people longing for deliverance, this is truly good news.

Isaiah also talks of a 'Way of Holiness' on which only the redeemed will walk. This image reminds us that God's redemption is not only about transformation of creation, but also about transformation of humanity. The Way of Holiness is a safe road, free from threat and fear, where the redeemed walk together toward their destination. It speaks of belonging, protection, and a journey shaped by God's presence.

There is a very real sense in which Jesus becomes this Way of Holiness, as in John 14:6 where he describes himself as 'The Way, the Truth, and the Life'. He is the road to God, the One who heals the broken and guides us into life. Advent reminds us that Christ has come, opening the Way for all his people to follow; and Christ will come again, leading us to our destination.



Jesus Christ, I am the way, the truth, and the life, Tommy Talisfig, 2023

Q) Which of the images in this passage speak most powerfully to you?

Q) What does the 'Way of Holiness' mean for us as followers of Christ today, and how can we encourage one another to stay on this path together?

Q) Advent is a season of waiting. How can this vision encourage us when waiting feels hard?

Are you the one?

(Read Matthew 11:2-11)



'When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'' (vs. 2,3)

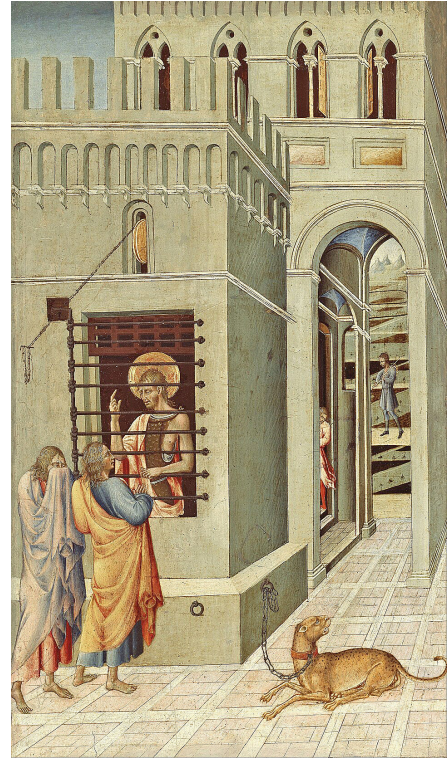
John the Baptist, now in prison, asks one of his disciples to check out whether Jesus really is the Messiah, or should he expect someone else?

John, who once boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Lamb of God, now wrestles with doubt. He had expected the Messiah to bring judgment and deliverance, but from where he was things looked different, with Jesus healing the sick, raising the dead, preaching good news to the poor.

Jesus answers not with arguments, but with evidence: lives transformed, hope restored, grace poured out. His response is gentle but firm - yes, I am the one, but maybe not quite the one you expected.

Advent speaks directly to this moment of doubt and waiting. Like John, we live between promise and fulfilment. We long for justice, healing, and peace, yet often the world still feels like a place of suffering and uncertainty.

Jesus' response reminds us that God's kingdom is already at work—in small, quiet, but powerful ways, through restoration, compassion and love shown.



Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist, 11C (Menologion of Basil II)

Q) Why should John, of all people, have struggled with doubt about Jesus' identity?

Q) What expectations do people today have of Jesus that may not match his true mission?

Q) Where do you see signs of God's kingdom breaking into our world right now?

Q) How can we respond to people's doubts during Advent with faith and honesty?

'Advent is a promise, not just a remembrance.' (Karl Barth)

'Advent creates people, new people.' (Henri Nouwen)

'It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope.' (Pope Benedict XVI)



A prayer

Lord Jesus, when doubts rise
and hope feels distant,
remind us of the signs of Your kingdom breaking in.
Open our eyes to see healing, restoration,
and good news around us,
and strengthen our hearts to trust that You are the One.
As we wait in this Advent season,
fill us with patience, courage, and joy,
so that we may walk in faith
and point others to Your light.
Amen.



Immanuel - God with us

Study Four



Mary & Joseph seeking refuge in Bethlehem, Simon de Vos, 1664

Opening Psalm : Restoration

(Read Psalm 80:1-7,17-19)



*'Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.'* (v. 19)

This is a communal prayer for a community seeking God's help after a disaster, but its words and emotion also reveal a strong personal relationship between a people and God their Shepherd, despite past sins.

But now, surrounded by hardship and feeling abandoned, they plead for God's mercy and rescue, with words that capture the honesty of a people who know their own weaknesses and sins, and now long for God's restoring power.

Verse 17 mentions 'the son of man you have raised up for yourself', and Christians have long seen these words as looking forward to Jesus, the Son of Man who comes as God's answer to our own cries for restoration.

The psalm ends with hope: 'Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.' Advent reminds us that God has not forgotten his people. In Jesus, he comes to rescue, revive, and lead us into new life.

For a weary world, this is the good news of Advent: God hears our cry, and in Christ, he restores us.

Q) What does it mean to ask God to 'shine his face' on us today?

Q) What emotions or images stand out to you in this psalm?

Q) How easy is it to pour out our hearts to God in prayer as in this Psalm, or is the natural inclination to bottle our emotions?

Q) How can we reflect God's restoration this Advent?

A sign of hope

(Read Isaiah 7:10-16)



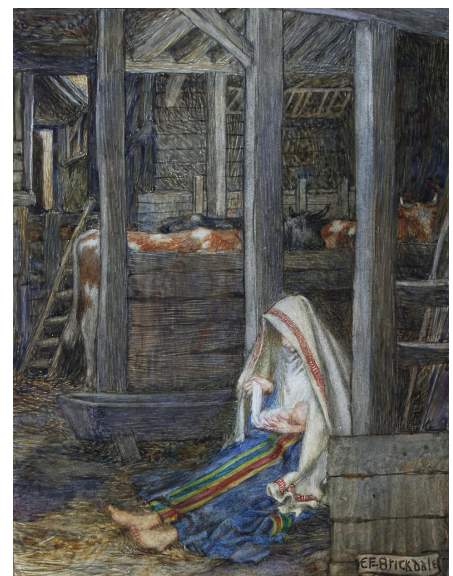
'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.' (v. 14b)

Ahaz's reign as king of Judah had been one of unfaithfulness - sacrificing to foreign gods such as Baal, and engaging in child sacrifices. Now Jerusalem was under attack and God sends Isaiah to meet Ahaz and offer reassurance and a sign that all is not lost. Ahaz refuses to listen, not out of faith, but fear and pride. So, God gives a sign anyway, 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.'

In its original setting, this sign was meant to remind Ahaz and the people that God had not abandoned them. Immanuel means God with us - a promise that even in a time of crisis, God's presence is sure. Yet Ahaz struggled to trust, preferring political alliances over reliance on God.

Beyond its original context, this prophecy finds even greater fulfilment in Advent. Matthew quotes it in his Gospel to show that in the birth of Jesus, God's ultimate sign has come - God is with us, not just in promise but in person.

Advent invites us into this tension between present troubles and future hope. Like Ahaz, we often face fear and uncertainty. Do we trust in our own strength, or in God's presence? The good news of Advent is that God has given the sign we need. In Christ, Immanuel has come.



Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale - The Nativity c1900

Q) What does Immanuel - God with us - mean for you personally?

Q) Where do we tend to rely on our own strength instead of trusting God's presence?

Q) How does Advent help us hold together as we wait, trust, and hope in God's promises?

God is with us always

(Read Matthew 1:18-25)



'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' (v. 21)

Matthew brings us to the heart of the season with the story of Jesus' birth from the perspective of Joseph, when he discovers that Mary is pregnant. The law gives him options, including quietly ending the engagement, but after God's intervention in a dream he chooses faith and love, trusting that Mary's pregnancy is indeed God's will, fulfilling Isaiah's prophesy.

This is the heart of Advent. The longings of Israel and the promises of God meet in the birth of Jesus. God is no longer distant but comes close, sharing our humanity, our joys, and our struggles. In Jesus, God is with us not only in moments of peace and celebration, but also in fear, confusion, and weakness. For Joseph, obedience meant stepping into uncertainty, but it was through trust that he experienced God's presence and purpose.



Joseph's Dream, Gaetano Gandolfi, c. 1790

Advent closes with this assurance: God is with us. Not just as a memory of Bethlehem, and not only as a future hope when Christ returns, but here and now, in the mess and beauty of everyday life. That is the good news we carry into Christmas and beyond - Immanuel, God with us, always.

Q) How does the response of Joseph challenge or inspire your own faith?

Q) What does the name Jesus ('God saves') reveal about his mission?

Q) How can you carry the message of Immanuel into the new year?

'Advent invites us to live in the tension of what has been and what will be.'
(Rowan Williams)

'Advent is a journey towards Bethlehem. May we let ourselves be drawn by the light of God made man. (Pope Francis)

'The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.'
(C S Lewis)



Lutheran Advent wreath Christ Candle Lit, picture by Kittelendon

A prayer

Gracious God, we thank You for guiding us
through this season of Advent—
a season of hope, peace, joy, and love.
In our waiting, You have reminded us that Your promises are sure.
In our doubts, You have shown us signs of Your kingdom breaking in.
And in our longing, You have given us the greatest gift:
Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.
As we step into Christmas,
fill our hearts with the hope that Christ brings,
the peace that calms our fears,
the joy that lifts our spirits,
and the love that overflows to others.
May we carry the light of Christ into a weary world,
trusting that You are with us now and always,
until the day when Your kingdom comes in fullness.
Through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.

Visio Divina

All Visio Divina, or 'Divine seeing' requires of us is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at an image, what the artist might say to us, even putting ourselves into the artwork, and allowing God to speak to us.

The four stages of Visio Divina, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us, are listed below the image.



Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist, 11C(Menologion of Basil II)

1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colours, people, places, and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms, and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

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