

Advent: Preparing to Receive the Light

From Darkness to Light

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In the summer of 1986, just before my 26th birthday, I closed the 5-year chapter of my life in Dallas, TX and made my way by bicycle towards South Carolina. During the previous year, I began to struggle to find meaning in my adult life. I saw that I was drifting in darkness with no plan and no sense of connection to others or even myself. A physical illness too pushed me deeper into isolation and hopelessness. But as I neared the bottom of that pit, I saw there was light, there was hope. As I tried to find healing for my body I realized that fundamentally my illness was of the spirit. The flickers of light growing around me lead me ultimately back to the Church, although by a pretty winding road.

By November I had spent some time with my folks and then went to stay with my grandparents in Charleston SC. I discovered that there was a Trappist monastery only 30 miles away from Charleston and I called the monks to make arrangements to make a 2-week retreat in their guest house. I ended up living and working with the brothers for almost 2 years, during which time I was confirmed, spent many hours studying the Faith and became immersed in monastic liturgical practice.

Mepkin Abbey was founded on 3000 acres of pine forest that was the sight of a rice plantation since before the American Revolution. The property was donated to the Church in the 1940's by Henry Luce, convert and founder of Time Magazine, and his wife, congresswoman, writer, activist and founder of Life Magazine Clare Booth Luce. The Abbey sits on the banks of the Cooper River, overlooking the remnants of the rice paddies and among scores of ancient oaks, towering pines and majestic black walnut trees. The forest teems with every kind of bird and forest animal, including fox, deer, snakes, turkeys, big owls and even alligators. The thing that struck me most was the deep deep darkness of the big woods. I was raised in city and suburb and had no conception of the real meaning of "night."

I had arrived at the monastery right at the beginning of Advent. During the first several days there I was trying to cope with the new daily routine of rising at 3am and moving to and from the Church in such unaccustomed darkness. I was deeply struck by the nature of the light that shone from the little church in the woods, which seemed like a blazing pinprick star that made the surrounding darkness seem even darker. Entering the warmth and brightness of the church from the cold black outside was at first like a physical blow to the chest. But soon the shock of the contrast of light and dark became a desire to enter, and to stay in that new world of Goodness, Beauty and Truth. I gladly let myself really and truly try to live out the nature of the Advent Liturgy: longing, waiting, preparing, just like Mary, to receive the true Light, Jesus.

During this Advent I would like to share with you some of that sense of preparation that Advent is supposed to be. I think all of us find that Advent has been completely lost in the frenzy of preparations that lead up to the "holidays." From my initial life-changing encounter with the light of Advent I grew to dread the time leading up to Christmas. That is because I made my living for many years running a retail operation where we began getting ready for the "holiday" buying season in JULY every year. Perhaps you too find that by the time Thanksgiving comes you are already exhausted and can't find any joy in the approach of our Lord into the world.

The first person to live Advent, and the one to experience it to utter fullness was of course the Blessed Virgin Mary. We can share in Mary's excitement and joy in preparing for the Infant by trying to enter into her life of Littleness and Emptying. British writer Caryll Houselander wrote two short and beautiful books during the darkest days of World War II London. During the four weeks of Advent we will explore the way that Mary prepared by emptying herself as portrayed in Caryll's book *The Reed of God*. We will also look at how we can enter into the life of the Infant Jesus as he prepared our salvation from the very moment of His birth in *Wood of the Cradle, Wood of the Cross*. I look forward to sharing the experience of trying to turn our lives over to God more fully by meditating on the meaning of Preparation and Anticipation, and by remembering that we can only be filled with His life as we make a place for Him by first emptying ourselves.