

THIS TRANSFORMING CYCLE A **WORD**

Commentary on the Readings for Sundays and Feast Days
of Cycle A of the Lectionary through 2023,
including full Scripture passages from
The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition
by Eugene Peterson and William Griffin

ALICE CAMILLE

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Alice Camille is a true treasure of the Catholic Church in the United States:

a woman who can make the Scriptures come alive in new and exciting ways; a serious student of the Bible who understands how to use it effectively in catechesis and religious education; a lay person who tries to live out the kingdom of God in her daily life. Camille has been reflecting on the meaning of the Bible for committed Catholics for many years and was instrumental in reviewing the translation of the additional writings for *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. So, when ACTA Publications wanted to produce a new series of three books containing reflections on the readings for each of the Sundays and Feast Days of Cycles A, B, and C and include the translation of those readings from *The Message*, Alice Camille was our first (and only) choice.

First, a word about *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. Many Catholics and others have never heard of it, even though it has sold over 16 million copies in various editions. It is a compelling, fresh, challenging, and faith-filled translation of the Bible from the original languages into contemporary, idiomatic American English. Eugene Peterson is a Presbyterian minister, pastor, writer, speaker, poet, Bible scholar and translator. He specializes in what is called “paraphrasal” translation, which tries to reproduce the spirit of the original text rather than provide a literal translation of the words. Rev. Peterson did not include the additional writings of what some Jews and Protestants call the Apocrypha, and Catholics and others call the Deuterocanonical books in the original version of *The Message*. Instead he recruited his friend and colleague, William Griffin, to translate these works in his same style. Griffin, a Catholic layman, writer, and translator, took his text from the *Nova Vulgata*, the revised and expanded version of the original Latin Vulgate that was approved for use by Catholics by Pope John Paul II in 1998. These additions were added to *The Message* in the biblical order expected by Catholics and published in 2013 as *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*.

You may find the Scripture passages in this book jarring at first. Certainly, you will not hear this translation read at Mass. But they might provide new insights into overly familiar texts and help you think again about what they might have to say to people today—especially when accompanied by Camille’s accessible yet erudite reflections.

We encourage you to try *This Transforming Word* for your own prayer and spiritual discernment as you prepare to preach (if you are the homilist) or listen (if you are a congregant) or discuss (if you belong to a small intentional group or community). Included in this book for Cycle A are the Sunday and Feast Day readings

for the years 2017, 2020, and 2023. Separate books are available for Cycle B in 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2024, and for Cycle C in 2016, 2019, 2022, and 2025. If you would like to receive the complete readings for each Sunday from *The Message* at no charge, simply go to www.CatholicEcumenicalMessage.com and sign up to receive them by email.

To purchase a copy of *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition* by Eugene Peterson and William Griffin or books by Alice Camille, including *Invitation to Catholicism*, *Invitation to the Old and New Testament*, *Isaiah and the Kingdom of God*, *The Forgiveness Book*, *The Rosary*, and *Seven Last Words*, go to any seller of books or visit www.actapublications.com. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at gpierce@actapublications.com.

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
President and Co-Publisher
ACTA Publications
Chicago, Illinois

Note on translating the name of God. In the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the generic name for divinity used by both Israel and its neighbors is translated God (or god). But the unique and distinctively personal name for God that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14) Rev. Peterson has translated as “God” in *The Message*.

INTRODUCTION

*“Use words truly and well. Don’t stoop to cheap whining.
Then, but only then, you’ll speak for me.
Let your words change them.
Don’t change your words to suit them.”*
Jeremiah 15:19

Words, words, words. The world is choked with them, as Hamlet wearily lamented. But most of them don’t amount to much. Thomas Merton agreed. After a short trip beyond the silence of his cloister at Gethsemani Abbey, Merton observed: “There is so much talking that goes on that is utterly useless.”

We talk, text, and e-mail. Media shouts from every corner of the room and each bend in the road. Yet in the barrage of advertising and so-called reporting, little is actually communicated. “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here.” That sentence, from Abraham Lincoln, is a rare exception in a sea of forgettable phrases. What you and I say today will not only quickly disappear. It’s a wonder if anyone hears us in the first place.

There is a cure for the endless, mindless, meaningless rant. Out of the silence, up from the deep, down from the heavens comes a transforming word that changes hearts—and *that* changes everything. This word transfigures because of its own remarkable metamorphosis: from cosmic eternal word to earthbound mortal flesh. This word shatters the barriers of time and needed to be spoken only once. Now it lives and moves and has being in those who hear it and reply.

This book is for those who are listening and hope to respond. Each Sunday and feast of the church year, the transforming word echoes its challenge. We hear it through stories of patriarchs and matriarchs who dare to embark in new directions trailing an untested divinity. It shouts in the oracles of wild prophets madly in love with an unlikely future. It sings in psalms and canticles. It beckons in Lady Wisdom. It invites us to come and see in gospels, and to repent and believe in letters of instruction. Creation testifies to it. Apocalypse mystically reveals it. And all the while this longing word is calling through the centuries, eternity waits in hushed silence for the freely rendered human response. Yours. Mine. Everybody’s.

ADVENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

..... The Night Is Far Spent

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 2:1-5

The Message Isaiah got regarding Judah and Jerusalem:

There's a day coming

when the mountain of GOD's House

Will be The Mountain—

solid, towering over all mountains.

All nations will river toward it,

people from all over set out for it.

They'll say, "Come,

let's climb GOD's Mountain,

go to the House of the God of Jacob.

He'll show us the way he works

so we can live the way we're made."

Zion's the source of the revelation.

GOD's Message comes from Jerusalem.

He'll settle things fairly between nations.

He'll make things right between many peoples.

They'll turn their swords into shovels,

their spears into hoes.

No more will nation fight nation;

they won't play war anymore.

Come, family of Jacob,

let's live in the light of GOD.

A Church year ends; another begins. And we begin on a peaceful note, with the prophet's vision of a world without war. Oh, for a world in which the last bomb's metal had been melted down for peacetime purposes!

Instead, we live in a world in which our bombs can hardly be safely contained, even when they are not being hurled at an enemy. We live at a time when minefields sown from wars long ended continue the horror of war indefinitely. We live in an age where children cannot forget, and their parents do not dare to remember. War has seeped into the structure of our world, and it flows in our veins, poisoning any hope of peace. We believe in war. We believe it is necessary. And because we put our faith in war, there will be more of it.

In a corner of our warrior hearts, Isaiah's vision of a world beyond war waits up for us. Isaiah leaves the light on, and hopes for company.

Under what conditions do you think war is "necessary"?

SECOND READING » ROMANS 13:11-14

But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

Okay, for the sake of argument, say that you're willing to make an ADVENT resolution this year, just to be novel. For a mere four weeks—thank God, Advent is shorter than Lent!—you are willing to cast off deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. So you run down the checklist of Paul's "deeds of darkness" (carousing, drunkenness, sexual excess, quarreling, jealousy) and you find you can go the distance on at least four of these easily enough. It's nobody's business which one has you biting your nails.

But even after you sign off on the deeds of darkness, there is still this business about putting on the light. That may be an even greater challenge, and it has no list (at least in this short passage) to go by. So be creative. Get together with a close friend or two and put on some Christmas lights that require no juice from the electric company. Check out parish or community efforts to assist those in need. Sing in a choir. Give freely. Laugh often. Love children. Invite someone to church. Forgive an enemy.

**What deeds of darkness are you being invited to surrender?
What armor of light might you take on at this time?**

GOSPEL » MATTHEW 24:37-44

"The Arrival of the Son of Man will take place in times like Noah's. Before the great flood everyone was carrying on as usual, having a good time right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. They knew nothing—until the flood hit and swept everything away.

"The Son of Man's Arrival will be like that: Two men will be working in the field—one will be taken, one left behind; two women will be grinding at the mill—one will be taken, one left behind. So stay awake, alert. You have no idea what day your Master will show up. But you do know this: You know that if the homeowner had known what time of night the burglar would arrive, he would have been there with his dogs to prevent the break-in. Be vigilant just like that. You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up."

We know for sure that Santa Claus is coming to town; and so is Snoopy, Frosty, the Grinch, Rudolph, and more seasonal visitors than we may care to name. We also know that Jesus is coming, but he doesn't advertise his arrival as relentlessly as these others so we aren't sure quite when. Will he arrive in time for the holidays? Too late to stop the next war? Too soon for me to acquire all the things I'd like to have in this world?

This is the Advent from which the season takes its name. Jesus is coming, and his advent is the one all these modern myths seek to recreate. Will Charlie Brown find the real meaning of Christmas? Only with a Scripture-quoting friend like Linus. Will the Grinch get a life? Only if he learns to share. Will Jimmy Stewart learn that it's a wonderful life? Only if he opens his eyes to the world he's always had. Jesus is coming all the time, but we won't know it if we refuse to change. That is the purpose of Advent, to give us fair notice that it's time to take time seriously.

For whom or what are you waiting?

WE RESPOND

Be a friend like Linus to someone who has not heard the message of the story of Bethlehem. Share your faith with someone who is still waiting for love to come.

*The night is about over,
dawn is about to break.
Be up and awake to what God is doing!*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

..... The Wolf and the Lamb

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 11:1-10

*A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his roots a budding Branch.
The life-giving Spirit of GOD will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,
the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-GOD.
Fear-of-GOD
will be all his joy and delight.
He won't judge by appearances,
won't decide on the basis of hearsay.
He'll judge the needy by what is right,
render decisions on earth's poor with justice.
His words will bring everyone to awed attention.
A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.
Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,
and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.
The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.
The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.
On that day, Jesse's Root will be raised high, posted as a rallying banner for the
peoples. The nations will all come to him. His headquarters will be glorious.*

Jesus is coming, the recent joke warns; everybody look busy! The punch line reveals our confusion about the Second Coming. What does it really mean to say "Jesus is coming?"

Prophecy tells us that the son of justice is the one we are expecting. He is inspired with what we have come to call the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding,

counsel, strength, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. (Piety is added in some translations.) He brings justice for the poor and judgment for the wicked. A time of peace attends his arrival. In that time, the powerful and the vulnerable will learn to live together in harmony.

Whenever prophets talk like this, about a world so different from the one we live in, a great many people just sigh and pray for kingdom come. Meanwhile, however, it's business as usual. The poor are ignored, or blamed, while the wicked get on quite well. Wars are fought for profit, and the powerful take advantage of the weak. Someday, it is believed, when Jesus blows the whistle, things will change....

This, however, is not what prophecy means or what the church holds true. If Jesus is coming, everybody ought to get busy, in earnest, being children of justice. We need to seek liberty for the poor and challenge the wicked. We need to be people of peace who protect the vulnerable. We should give people reason to suspect Jesus is coming.

**Do people know “Jesus is coming” by the way you use
power, and material goods, and in your treatment of others?**

SECOND READING » ROMANS 15:4-9

That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it's written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!

So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it! Jesus, staying true to God's purposes, reached out in a special way to the Jewish insiders so that the old ancestral promises would come true for them. As a result, the non-Jewish outsiders have been able to experience mercy and to show appreciation to God. Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do! For instance:

*Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn-sing;
I'll sing to your name!*

The late Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago worried about the lack of harmony in the modern church. Progressive Catholics who embraced the reforms of the Second Vatican Council seemed determined to take apart, brick by brick, the church that conservative Catholics had always revered. Not only did Bernardin sense the tension between the two groups, but he also observed the lack of respect for the values and

perspectives of the other side. The unity that Christ seeks for the church seemed threatened by the widening gulf.

The tension between liberal and conservative Catholics is real, but it's not the first time the church has faced division, even outright hostility, within its ranks. The original factions were Jewish and Gentile Christians who had different ideas about what it meant to embrace the Gospel. Did the Jewish believer in Jesus remain within the covenant of Moses or go beyond it? Did the Gentile believer need to be circumcised and embrace the Law? Paul urged harmony, not uniformity, among the conflicted communities. The glory of God can be served in more ways than one.

How do you communicate with those whose spirituality or theology differs from your own?

GOSPEL » MATTHEW 3:1-12

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

John and his message were authorized by Isaiah’s prophecy:

Thunder in the desert!

Prepare for God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It’s your life that must change, not your skin! And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.

“I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I’m a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

If Jesus is the Lamb of God, John the Baptist is the wolf. He stands alone as an inter-testamental figure, more like the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures than the evangelists of Christianity. There is no evidence that he ever became a disciple of Jesus. In fact, the evidence points to his retaining his own following up to the time of his execution. He is the finger of God, pointing to the new revelation, but he stands apart from it, howling out warnings about the scourge to come.

John was no prophet of gentle messages, of love and forgiveness. He came to drown the devil in the flesh, and raise up a nation of spirit prepared to meet its Maker. He lived in the wild, dressed and ate like a wild man. He hurled untamed words at the powerful people of his day, and they trembled. He was raw authority, and many people walked into the Jordan, convinced by his charisma or afraid of his warnings. In the end, the wolf of God would decrease, as the Lamb would increase. For only a brief hour, they browsed together, sharing the message, "The reign of God is at hand."

Name figures in Christianity today like John the Baptist.

Do you find them appealing?

WE RESPOND

Be a wolf in faith: live your convictions unflinchingly and publicly. Be a lamb: bring peace, patience, and the willingness to dialogue with those who see the vision of church differently than you do.

*"The main character in this drama
will ignite the kingdom life within you."*

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

.....Must We Wait for Another?

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 35:1-6, 10

*Wilderness and desert will sing joyously,
the badlands will celebrate and flower—
Like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom,
a symphony of song and color.
Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift.
Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts.
God's resplendent glory, fully on display.
GOD awesome, GOD majestic.
Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees
Tell fearful souls,
"Courage! Take heart!
GOD is here, right here,
on his way to put things right
And redress all wrongs.
He's on his way! He'll save you!"
Blind eyes will be opened,
deaf ears unstopped,
Lame men and women will leap like deer,
the voiceless break into song.
The people GOD has ransomed
will come back on this road.
They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion,
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.*

How patient are you? Patient enough to wait for the desert to burst into flowers? For shaking hands to be stilled, for weak knees to be strong again? Patient enough to wait for the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to run, the mute to sing? That kind of patience is a divine quality. For most of us, these things are too wonderful to imagine, much less to expect.

The prophecy to the people of God in exile is that they will return home to their land, a thing as impossible to dream of as a blooming desert. Still the message delivered to the door of God's people is always the same: God will save you. From Egypt, from Babylon, from your sins and yourselves, God will save you. To those who believe, the desert is a garden waiting to awaken. No situation in life is barren, no

defeat final. No matter the depth to which we have fallen, God is prepared to raise us up. When our hearts are most frightened, we can lean on this word.

What desert-like experiences in your life turned out to be hidden fields of flowers?

SECOND READING » JAMES 5:7-10

Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master's Arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but sure work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time.

Friends, don't complain about each other. A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know. The Judge is standing just around the corner.

Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything, and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course! You've heard, of course, of Job's staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That's because God cares, cares right down to the last detail.

I've never been a farmer, though I've passed through the heartland enough to admire the endless toil of those who plow the land. I am a gardener, though, and with my humble patch of soil I've learned a lot about patience. I've learned about waiting on the seed, carrying the water, praying for the sun, and coddling the tiny life that emerges in its own time. I've learned about mystery, and I've learned about trust. I've learned not to give up when a plant looks and plays dead. Life clings fiercely to life, and if there is the smallest bit of encouragement, most things will go on living despite the odds.

Parents learn these same lessons from their children, and we all learn these lessons from living the life of faith. The kingdom is the seed that Jesus planted, and through prayer and fidelity, we nurture a patch of the kingdom in our own lives. Though we may feel we're losing, that the odds are stacked against the spiritual life, we can turn the corner into outright holiness in a heartbeat. We support one another in patience, prayer, and fidelity to values through the long winters of silence and barrenness. And then, just when we think the ground of our hearts will produce no yield, love emerges into the light.

Who supports you in faithfulness to prayer and Christian values?

GOSPEL » MATTHEW 11:2-11

John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, "Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?"

*Jesus told them, "Go back and tell John what's going on:
The blind see,*

*The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.*

"Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!"

When John's disciples left to report, Jesus started talking to the crowd about John. "What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pajamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That's right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you'll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, 'I'm sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.'

"Let me tell you what's going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him."

No one ever born was greater than John the Baptist, by Jesus' own admission. And yet even John found it hard to keep patience while Jesus wandered through the first season of his ministry. From prison, John heard the reports of Jesus teaching, healing, gathering crowds to hear the word of God. He didn't hear what he had expected: Jesus proclaiming his kingship, claiming Jerusalem as his capitol, denouncing the Romans or the Temple leaders, and "laying the ax to the root of the tree," once and for all. John had preached the coming destruction, and Jesus seemed, well, more *lamb* than *God*. It was hard for John not to be disappointed, and to wonder for a moment if he had misread Jesus altogether.

Jesus doesn't chide John for lacking faith. Instead, he quotes prophecy to reassure John that God's time of favor has arrived. Then Jesus reminds the crowds that John's greatness in history is surpassed by anyone who arrives at an understanding of the kingdom through faith. If we wait for no other, if we cast our lot with Jesus, we find that we do not have to get to the kingdom at all. The kingdom arrives in us. What circumstances make you impatient? How far might you be willing to follow Jesus and wait for his kingdom?

WE RESPOND

Name the deserts, the blindnesses and crippled areas of your life where new life is needed. Pray for the seed of that life to be planted in you, and resolve to encourage that life in every way.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

.....Visions and Dreams

FIRST READING » ISAIAH 7:10-14

GOD spoke again to Ahaz. This time he said, “Ask for a sign from your GOD. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!”

But Ahaz said, “I’d never do that. I’d never make demands like that on God!”

So Isaiah told him, “Then listen to this, government of David! It’s bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you’re making God tired. So the Master is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She’ll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us).”

Ahaz was a messy sort of king—though in the history of kings, that makes him pretty normal. When neighboring kingdoms urged alliances on Israel, Isaiah cautioned Ahaz to remain politically neutral. But the king refused, inviting the Assyrians into his country, and Israel became a vassal state to Assyria and its gods.

Ahaz had his chance to do it right, complete with signs from God as to how to proceed. But he chose to ignore all divine indicators, including God’s prophet speaking directly into his life, in favor of his own judgment. This makes him very familiar to us, since we also lead rather messy lives in which our own judgment drags us in directions from which all of God’s angels would warn us away. Signs, messengers, even the prophetic witness of friends and family are useless to us if we insist on figuring things out in reasonable, logical fashion. Logic dictated that Ahaz make nice with Assyria, which was by far the more powerful nation. But that logical decision led a nation into idolatry and sin. Making the reasonable compromise might seem to us to be the only sensible thing to do, but there are demons lurking in the swamp of mere reason. As anti-intellectual as it sounds, as foolish as it may appear in the eyes of the world, sometimes we have to discern the signs and attend to the prophets that are given to us.

**Who are the prophets who speak to your life?
What signs have been given to you to discern your way?**

SECOND READING » ROMANS 1:1-7

I, Paul, am a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment, authorized as an apostle to proclaim God’s words and acts. I write this letter to all the believers in Rome, God’s friends.

The sacred writings contain preliminary reports by the prophets on God’s Son. His descent from David roots him in history; his unique identity as Son of God was shown by the Spirit when Jesus was raised from the dead, setting him apart as the Messiah, our Master. Through him we received both the generous gift of his life and the urgent task of passing it on to others who receive it by

entering into obedient trust in Jesus. You are who you are through this gift and call of Jesus Christ! And I greet you now with all the generosity of God our Father and our Master Jesus, the Messiah.

Recently I issued invitations for a party, inviting friends to “a gathering of holy people.” When people called to RSVP, they each admitted, “I’ll come. But I don’t really think I belong in such a gathering.” Why are we so sure we aren’t holy people? Is it because we’re so aware of ourselves as sinners? The two states, of course, are not mutually exclusive. If we understand the nature of humanity, and sin, we know that you can’t have one without the other. And yet we are “called to holiness”—is this a call to utter frustration? I can’t believe this is a game God is playing with us: doomed to sin, helpless to be holy. I have to believe, rather, that holiness is possible, or we wouldn’t be called to it.

Holiness isn’t about displays of piety, or that halo effect the portrait saints reveal to us. Holiness is the capacity to reflect God’s light in the world. My friends have each done that for me, shown me a bit more of the divine face in their responsiveness to Gospel justice, charity, and fidelity. The quiet heroism of their lives—loving their spouses, raising their children, not grasping for material success over spiritual gain—is a constant source of inspiration for me. Even when they falter, in their confusion they raise holy questions: what is God asking me to do? What is right, and not only beneficial to me? The road to holiness is closer to the path we’re walking on than we think. Let us be light.

**How do you reflect God’s light into the world?
What prevents you from revealing more of that light?**

GOSPEL » MATTHEW 1:18-24

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn’t know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.” This would bring the prophet’s embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;

They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for “God is with us”).

Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God’s angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

Joseph is a fascinating character in the story of salvation. He only appears in two of the gospels, and even in Matthew, his largest appearance, he has no speaking part. A silent man given a humble role who accepts his task and then disappears from the story on cue—what a fellow, this Joseph! We have no idea what happens to him after Jesus' twelfth year. His role is to bring the savior into his majority, as father-protector. The man himself vanishes behind his vocation.

All we do know of Joseph is that he says yes to his mission. He says yes to a dream he had about an angel. The angel in the dream tells him a thing no self-respecting man would believe, and yet it is enough for Joseph. He's a man of remarkable faith, obedient to dreams, faithful under adversity. How absurd it might have seemed to the people of Nazareth, that a man who worked with his hands could be swayed by something so insubstantial! Yet a man who can look at a piece of wood and envision the serviceable thing it might become under skilled hands understood how God might shape his life for a purpose to which he might be blind. Joseph displayed the same mute trust that wood has in the carpenter's hands. And out of that trust, God built a bridge to heaven.

Merry Christmas.

**How does the figure of Joseph challenge you
in your attention to God's call in your own life?**

WE RESPOND

Be like wood in the carpenter's hands. Pray this Christmas that God might shape your life for a holy purpose. Even if you can't see the direction God is leading you, surrender more fully to signs, dreams, prophets and angels that may emerge on your path. If you can't see them, pray to be given eyes to see and ears to hear.

*You are who you are
through this gift and call of Jesus Christ!*