

Our liturgy celebrates God's desire to be with us, to converse and share a meal

## Third Sunday of Advent – Year C

Zep 3:14-18a, Is 12:2-3, 4, 5-6., Phil 4:4-7, Lk 3:10-18



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Good evening. Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Our Gospel ends with John the Baptist preaching the Good News. For some, the heart of the Good News is found in John 3:16; “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” This is what Advent celebrates; the birth of Jesus who will bring the message of God’s unbounded love. Recognizing God’s love is Good News.

There is a principle in physics called resonance. If you strike a tuning fork, its vibrations will cause vibrations in a nearby, similarly-tuned tuning fork. This phenomenon – where the vibrations of one object produce vibrations in another – is called sympathetic resonance. The Genesis story tells of God creating man and woman in God’s own image and likeness; similarly-tuned if you will. I would suggest that there is a sympathetic resonance of sorts between the Creator and the created. We can touch and experience that divine resonance in the depth of our prayer and love. These moments of resonance bring consolation in the knowledge that God is with us. Ours is a God who wishes to communicate with and through us. That is the Good News and our joy. “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” Genesis 1:31

God wants to share life with us and Mary’s son teaches us how to pray from the inner room. Our awareness of God’s presence matures in the spiritual journey we call life. As I was gathering leaves this fall, my mind wandered to the acorns and seeds that would lie dormant throughout the winter. With the warmth of spring, they would sprout with new life. The gift of maturity is that the awe and wonder of these things are easier to see. I found myself resting in the mystery of God who created the world I see and the universe beyond. Through my seasons, God has invited me to new life. Marriage, family and this community have been part of that invitation. As God invites us to new life, he

draws us ever closer, ever deeper in his love. He invites us to open our hearts and rest in the mystery and abundance of divine love. How can our final breath be seen as anything other than God's continuing embrace and invitation to draw closer? There is great joy and comfort in that knowledge. Sometimes it is good to be an acorn with the knowledge of spring. "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." Genesis 1:31

Our liturgy celebrates God's desire to be with us, to converse and share a meal. In proclaiming the Gospel this morning I asked, "May God be with you." May his Holy Spirit be with each of us opening our hearts to an awareness of the Sacred. As I watched the bees land on the butterfly bush this summer, they would actually bend the branch. Not so the butterflies. They landed ever so gently with only the slightest of tremor. Sometimes God's voice rests that lightly on our heart. The spiritual journey is the perfection of eye, ear and heart in a universe in which the Creator is sculptor, celestial pianist and lover. In that divine resonance, we are invited to dance with God.

Often, we find God in the silence that is listening. One practice for reading scripture is *Lectio Divina*, literally "Divine Reading." It is a meditative way of reading scripture where we let go of our agendas and open ourselves to what God is saying. It is listening for the butterfly landing on the bush. We read and listen for the word or phrase that touches us in the moment. Then we savor the words like a fine wine. Where are you taking me Lord? What are you asking me to see? The Synod on Synodality opens itself to hearing the Holy Spirit using this meditative reading of scripture. For those new to *Lectio Divina*, I will include an introduction to this prayer style at the end of my homily, posted for you on the St. Toms website.

In the Nativity story there is plenty to savor and ponder. No doubt Mary wondered at all that had taken place. In the embrace of God and Joseph, she drew their child to her. Children are a reminder of a love far beyond ourselves, a divine love that spills over in the sound of a child's laughter. Even in the days where there is more attitude than laughter, children are a reminder of something precious. Our highest attendance for Christmas mass is the children's service. Their exuberance, honesty and laughter are a blessing and cause for celebration of God with us. Our children are very much a part of the Nativity story and in that story the story of humankind, listening and becoming.

Advent is a time of preparation, waiting and listening for the voice of God. We believe that God is with us. We believe that he speaks to us in scripture, in creation and in the laughter of a child. May we be attentive to that voice always.

Again, our liturgy celebrates God's desire to be with us, to converse and share a meal. In our reception of the Eucharist, we do just that.

All scripture quotations are taken from. *The New American Bible, Revised edition*. USCCB, 1987.

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## Lectio Divina – A Brief History by Dan Burke

Lectio Divina means “Divine Reading” and refers specifically to an approach to prayer and scripture reading practiced by monastics since the early Church.

The idea of praying with sacred scripture comes to the Church through ancient Jewish tradition. Christians in the early Church continued this tradition and further developed the practice of prayer and meditation using mostly the psalms as a rich source of heartfelt engagement with God. This development is evident in early Church History in the 48th chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict (A.D. 480-453).

In the 11th century, a Carthusian prior named Guigo formalized Lectio Divina, describing the practice in a letter written to a fellow religious. This letter has become known as *The Ladder of Monks* and describes a four-runged ladder to Heaven, each rung being one of the four steps in his method of prayerful scripture reading. These steps are provided below along with a short definition of each and brief quotes from Guigo’s letter:



**Lectio (reading):** An attentive, slow, repetitious recitation of a short passage of scripture.  
*“looking on Holy Scripture with all one’s will and wit”*

**Meditatio (meditation):** An effort to understand the passage and apply it to my own life.  
*“a studious searching with the mind to know what was before concealed”*

**Oratio (prayer):** Engaging or talking with God about the passage.  
*“a devout desiring of the heart to get what is good and avoid what is evil”*

**Contemplatio (contemplation):** Allowing oneself to be absorbed in the words of God as the Holy Spirit draws us into His presence through scripture.  
*“the lifting up of the heart to God tasting somewhat of the heavenly sweetness”*

## Lectio Divina Step by Step

As with any serious attempt to progress in the spiritual life, the practice of Lectio Divina will require deliberate patience. To be deliberate we will need to commit to at least ten minutes every day. The best way to do this is to schedule our prayer times at the *beginning* of each week *before* we schedule anything else. Trying to squeeze prayer into our schedules after they are already full almost always results in our busy-ness squeezing prayer *out* of our schedules.

With respect to the process of Lectio Divina, it may feel mechanical until we find a natural rhythm. As well, we will naturally struggle with distractions. This is where patience comes in. It’s important to keep things as simple as is possible. There will be no Lectio Divina police looking over our shoulders to be sure that we exercise perfection in our practice. No need to worry about the details. Simply seek the Lord in the scriptures. He is waiting for you there and will be delighted to lead you into a more profound relationship with Him. With that in mind, let’s talk about how to prepare for our time with Him.

### Preparation

First, we should arrange a place to pray that is restful and devoid of any distractions or things that might distract us (i.e. computers, TV, etc.). This may involve lighting candles, burning incense or creating whatever atmosphere fosters calm and peace. The presence of icons and other visual aids to meditation can be of great benefit here as well. It is best if the place chosen for Lectio Divina (or any kind of prayer) is a comfortable area set aside just for this activity.

Once our environment is properly prepared, we should then assume a bodily posture that is conducive to prayer and reading. As we consider our posture, we should do so with the recognition that we are entering into the presence of God. Our posture should reflect one that would be the same as if we were with Christ in the flesh or before him in Eucharistic adoration. Again, simplicity is important. We need not over-emphasize posture.

We then turn our hearts to God, begin to breathe slowly and deeply, focusing on simple attentiveness to the Lord until we are relaxed and able to focus our attention on scripture. If our minds wander, we should avoid any frustration or self-condemnation and *gently* bring our attention back to our Lord and the text, breathing in and out in a purposeful and relaxed manner. It is important to note that unlike in non-Christian forms of Eastern prayer which seek to *empty* the mind, Christian prayer seeks to *fill* our minds with an attentiveness to God. This gentle but purposeful effort will yield a constant aiming and re-aiming of our hearts and minds toward Him and His Word.

Once we are as calm and peaceful as is possible, we simply acknowledge that Christ is with us and we pray in this or some similar way:

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

### ***Holy Spirit Prayer of the Synod on Synodality***

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,  
as we gather together in Your name.  
With You alone to guide us,  
make Yourself at home in our hearts.  
Teach us the way we must go  
and how we are to pursue it.  
We are weak and sinful;  
do not let us promote disorder.  
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path  
nor partiality influence our actions.  
Let us find in You our unity  
so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right.  
All this we ask of You,  
who are at work in every place and time,  
in the communion of the Father and the Son,  
forever and ever. Amen.

***Lectio, The Reading*** – An attentive slow repetitious recitation of a short passage of scripture. It is always advisable to meditate on the scripture from the mass of the day, particularly the Gospel passage. However, any text of scripture will do. The key is not to rush. The goal is not to finish any particular portion of scripture but to purposefully delve into the depths of any passage that will lift our hearts to God. Just before we begin reading, we trace the sign of the cross on the scriptures, kiss the cross we traced, and then begin to read very *slowly*, vocally, and gently, coming to an understanding of the words themselves along with the related ideas and images that surface. When a particular passage or word strikes us we pause to consider it more fully. At the first pause, we will then naturally move into *meditatio*. If you don't seem to progress in this way, simply stay at each phase until you do. Don't worry if you don't progress. The goal is not to fulfill the method, but to honor and seek God.

***Meditatio, The Meditation*** – An effort to understand the passage and apply it to my own life. Now we meditate on what we have read, visualizing it and listening for His prompting or His guiding. We seek the deeper spiritual meanings of the words as we place ourselves in a gospel scene as one of the participants or simply hear God speaking directly to us as we read the words. We don't strain or exert extreme effort here, we simply allow the words to penetrate our hearts and minds and follow where God leads us through the text. Sometimes it is helpful to slowly repeat the passage or word over and over again until the captivation and conversation with God on the passage subsides. It can also be helpful to read each word and to briefly pause before we read the next. As we do this, we allow for silence and careful listening. We break the normal frantic pace and cycle of life to be attentive to the Beloved. As we begin to respond or converse with God about our encounter with Him, we then move into *oratio*.

***Oratio, The Prayer*** – Engaging or talking with God about the passage. As we are drawn into the passage we begin to converse with God about what we are reading. Oratio is simply the response of the heart to God. It is important here to remember that God has revealed Himself as a person. When we talk with Him, it is sometimes helpful call this to mind. Our conversation should be as natural as with someone whom we deeply love and desire to know. In whatever manner we are led, we ask for forgiveness, we thank Him, we praise Him, we ask Him to for the grace to be changed by what we have read. We ask Him to help us more fully realize what He wants us to be and to help us apply His moral, spiritual, or practical guidance to our lives. As we engage with Him, He may choose to call us deeper, to become lost in this heavenly dialogue with Him. For those who tend to be very talkative in life and prayer, it might be important here to slow down our own words and to be attentive to Him rather than to what we desire to say. We will eventually find ourselves moving into *contemplatio*.

***Contemplatio, The Contemplation*** – Allowing oneself to become absorbed in the words of God and the presence of God as he calls us into deeper prayer. Here God satisfies our ultimate thirst and needs as the Holy Spirit prays with us, in us, and through us. Sometimes we recognize this work in our hearts; sometimes it is merely a matter of faith that He is with us and imparting His life-changing grace to us. Always we can know that He is changing us because he has promised that the “word of God never returns void” and that as St. Paul says, “faith comes from hearing the word of God.” It is important here to note that this phase of prayer is not always sensual. In fact, for those who are more advanced in the interior life, it may be a time of dryness and a dark silence. Regardless, we know by faith that he is true to His word. If we seek Him, we will find Him, even if He is found in ways that are difficult, or very different than we had anticipated. To sum up Guigo's thoughts on the four elements; reading *seeks*, meditation *finds*, prayer *asks*, and contemplation *tastes*.

PS: A short but more in-depth read on Lectio Divina as it relates to the prayer of Teresa of Avila is entitled ***Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer***.

PPS: If you are worried about properly understanding the scriptures, the best Catholic Study Bible available is the new ***Ignatius Catholic Study Bible***.

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