

## Obstacles and Crooked Paths: Preparing a Way for the Lord:

### Advent Reflection for Week Two

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#### “Prepare a way for the Lord; make his paths straight.”

*The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight his paths.” John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. (Mk 1:1-5)*

#### Introduction:

As we prepare ourselves this Advent to celebrate Christmas, the first verses of St. Mark’s Gospel are straight forward and direct. We need only abandon our crooked ways for straight ones so that God can be truly present in our lives. Mark’s message quoting Isaiah states that from the wilderness of our lives God sends us the message to straighten our paths and abandon our crooked ways. We need to straighten up our lives to prepare for the heart-stirring presence of God within us and our world. We know that divine love and grace flow infinitely in the paths of our lives, but that too often we block God’s entrance. One of our great blessings is the Church’s liturgical year which allows us to begin anew with each Advent to renew our spiritual grounding, to straighten out our lives, to unblock the paths of grace and to experience conversion.

How can we prepare for the Lord to enter our lives more intimately this Advent and Christmas? Jesus described God’s straight path to enter our lives as pure love of God. What are the crooked paths we follow? One very common block in our paths is holding onto injuries and failing to forgive others or ourselves. The countless paths of pain that we meet on our journeys can either put us on a straighter path of understanding our humanness and developing stronger compassion for others, or injuries can block our paths by fear of further injury and heightening distrust in our relationships, even putting us on the path of revenge and cold-heartedness toward those who have injured us.

We may find over time that our unforgiving paths seem safe and comfortable enough that we seldom if ever hear the voices of forgiveness, reconciliation and acceptance of those persons who harmed us. On this path we often justify our crooked paths with reasoning that is not found in the Good News; e.g., those relationships are dead; we can never let ourselves be hurt like that again by anyone; some offenses are unforgivable etc. Fear of injury can block our relationships and banish love, because we choose to stay on the path of pain, blocking the way that leads to love and unity.

Another common crook in God’s path into our lives is anger. Similar to how unforgiveness blocks grace from our lives, anger can make our relational paths go awry. Anger is universal and unavoidable. It crosses our paths in countless ways. We are easily led into anger and usually can identify things that are wrong in our world and that have frustrated us, e.g., misbehaving children, reckless and selfish drivers on the highways or disrespect and unfair treatment from family members, colleagues, etc. Anger can even deceive us into blaming God for disrupting our lives.



# ADVENT REFLECTION

Our countless encounters with anger can affect us in two ways. First, the experiences can straighten out our path for God to enter our lives by sensitizing and empowering us to seek the reign of God rather than our own reign. Secondly, anger can bend us down the path toward our individual kingdoms where we reign or play God. Unfortunately, anger usually flows out of our lives in hostility towards the weak and vulnerable, the very one's Jesus says we must care for the most. Anger snakes into our proud egos to judge and demonize people around us. Anger even leads us to condemn our own inner persons for frustrating some plan we have imagined but which differs from God's plan for creation. Anger blocks our relationships and also destroys love, putting us on a path to our solitary kingdoms and away from the divine one where human love flourishes.

This Advent, Isaiah calls us to listen to the John the Baptists in our individual wildernesses calling us to straighten out our paths and our lives. It is a prophetic message we may not find easy to accept or heed. The path of acceptance and forgiveness is a transformative one. Being accepted and forgiven deepens our appreciation and understanding of our humanness and our dependence on and solidarity with each other. Finally we need to return to the present and plan a straight path of forgiveness to the persons we have exiled. This path straightens out our crooked paths and opens us for God's grace to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In a similar way, we can put ourselves into the shoes of those whom we have made the objects of our anger. We can imagine feeling the pain of being vulnerable and treated as inferior, of being subjected to angry hostility and cold-hearted, arbitrary use of power. We can choose to feel the pain of those we have victimized with our anger and hear their voices in the wilderness inviting us to let God enter our lives and reign rather than choosing to reign in our solitary world.

Lastly, we can straighten out our crooked ways in order to allow God to enter our lives by inviting the Divine Healer into our injured and angry selves, into our broken relationships and our deep frustrations. The voice crying in the wilderness is that of Jesus Christ in the alienated, exiled and suffering persons in our lives, society and in our heart of hearts where our true selves reside. When we choose this path of healing relationships in the presence of God we straighten out our crooked paths and find ourselves trusting and loving God with our whole minds and hearts.

Fortunately Christ has given us a straight and simple way to stay on this path; all we need to do is render regularly from our hearts the prayer he gave us, the Lord's Prayer. When we ask that God "forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us" and that the divine "will be done on earth," we straighten our crooked paths for awhile and allow the infinite love and grace of God to enter our lives. This Advent can lead us to a true conversion and opening for a more vibrant presence of God in our lives if we abandon any crooked ways and choose instead the simple and straight path of love, acceptance and forgiveness. ■



## Advent Prayer

Mystery of Infinite Love and Care, You forever call us to enjoy your Divine Presence both in our lives now on earth in the gift of creation and forever in heaven.

During this Advent, guide us by your Spirit to straighten out our crooked ways. Enter our lives and help us extend your forgiveness and acceptance to those we have exiled and alienated.

Grant us Your Wisdom to love and care for each person in our lives as you do. Strengthen us to avoid the paths of temptation which harden our hearts and cloud our minds.

May Your grace and love flow into us each moment as we prepare to celebrate Your incarnation. May we celebrate your presence in all those we meet. **Amen.**

## Case Study: Immigrant Children In the USA, 2008

### Welcoming the Child; Welcoming Jesus

One area today where our crooked ways block God's grace is in the broken USA immigration system. This Advent, how are we being called to welcome Christ in the immigrants and in their children? What concrete steps can we take to straighten out our society's paths to a more just and caring world?

### Case Study: Mothers Against Illegal Aliens – Arizona

In January 2006, Michelle Dallacrocce founded Mothers Against Illegal Aliens (MAIA), a group that, in her words, was formed "to show every mother in America what is going on our streets." Through media appearances, connections with extremists, and personal appearances at anti-immigration events, Dallacrocce echoes the anti-immigrant themes of a "mass invasion" of unintelligent, disrespectful, conspiratorial criminals while targeting her message to women and families. She focuses on immigration as a threat to American children and denigrates the values of immigrant families, branding immigrant children as "dumb" and violent.

The introduction to the MAIA Website states, "Our beautiful Nation has been turned into a jungle by the mass invasion of illegal aliens - the streets of America; the neighborhoods and communities where we live; the malls and stores where we shop; the schools where our LEGAL [emphasis in original] children attend - and yes, even the churches where we worship—are now the Citadels of fear, bigotry, racism, physical danger and hate! The LEGAL children of America's 21st century have become the scapegoats and the victims of this invasion of illegal aliens...As evidenced by Spanish homework being sent home with our American Children." (From : [http://www.adl.org/Civil\\_Rights/anti\\_immigrant/maia.asp](http://www.adl.org/Civil_Rights/anti_immigrant/maia.asp)). This example represents everything wrong with the current debate being play out in our society today.

Such actions and efforts are deplorable and an outrage. Respect for the dignity of the human person and basic decency can never stand for such actions. The worth and dignity of human life demands that all life is revered as sacred and treated in a way befitting such dignity. Unlike the group mentioned above, the Church calls us to see and respond to all people with love and respect. Love of God is seen in how one treats one's neighbor - regardless of one's immigration status.

### Catholic Church Welcomes Immigrants and Their Children

the Church holds a much different view. As Bishop Thomas Wenski states, "The so-called 'illegals' are so not because they wish to defy the law; but, because the law does not provide them with any channels to regularize their status in our country – which needs their labor. They are not breaking the law; the law is breaking them."

Perhaps most damaging are the adverse, long-term effects these policies have had on immigrant communities. The overriding emotion many immigrants feel is fear. Not only do legal immigrants worry that a loved one may be swept away in a work site raid or after a knock at the door at home, they are fearful for their own futures — and the futures of their children — in the United States. This is not the way to encourage integration and responsible citizenship.

*(Bishop Thomas Wenski is the Bishop of Orlando and a consultant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration.)*

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# ADVENT REFLECTION

## A Journey Of Hope

Since its founding, the United States has received immigrants from around the world who have found opportunity and safe haven in a new land. The labor, values, and beliefs of immigrants from throughout the world have transformed the United States from a loose group of colonies into one of the leading democracies in the world today. From its founding to the present, the United States remains a nation of immigrants grounded in the firm belief that newcomers offer new energy, hope and cultural diversity.

Our common faith in Jesus Christ moves us to search for ways that favor a spirit of solidarity. It is a faith that transcends borders and bids us to overcome all forms of discrimination and violence so that we may build relationships that are just and loving.

Excerpts above taken from [Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope](#), A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration From the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States. For more Catholic programs, analysis, training kits, reflections on immigration, visit the following web sites: <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/>; <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/>

## Reflection Questions:

### Forgiveness on a Personal Level:

- Where have I exiled others from my life because of injuries? Where must I extend forgiveness and reconciliation?
- Reflect on Jesus' words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What am I hearing and feeling?
- How can I bring my broken and strained relationships to Christ the Healer in prayer and ask his guidance in straightening things out?
- What are the necessary steps I can take to heal my fractured relationships?

### Forgiveness on a Social Level:

- Who has been demonized as enemies and excluded as outcasts, in our society today?
- What actions have I taken in my own life to counter act the stereotypes and underlying prejudices that accompany this kind of social stigmatizing?
- Where can I take concrete steps to improve the social conscience and become more informed about my faith-community and government's steps to address these exclusions?

### Anger on a Personal Level:

- How do I handle daily frustrations and the angers they create in my life?
- How aware am I of my hostile feelings and the ways I project these on the weak and vulnerable people in my life?
- How do my frustrations and angers sensitize, humble and open me more to the mystery of God's reign coming into my life?
- How often do I bring my frustrations, angers and hostilities to Christ, and ask for divine guidance to resolve my personal conflicts?

### Anger on a Social Level:

- How aware am I of the ways my society scapegoats and victimizes its weak and vulnerable members in order to deflect blame away from those who exercise civic responsibility?,
- What steps can I take to address these social issues in my Church, society and as a global citizen?

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*"What came to be  
through God was life,  
and this life was the light  
of the human race; the  
light shines in the  
darkness, and the  
darkness has not  
overcome it."*

*-John 1:4-5*

