

*An  
Advent  
of  
Understanding*

**Facing the First Christmas  
After the Death of a Loved One**



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## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Know that the Lord is coming and with him all His saints; that day will dawn with a wonderful light.*

**Evening Prayer I, *Liturgy of the Hours*,  
First Sunday of Advent**

THANKSGIVING WAS ONLY THREE DAYS AGO and there has already been the predictable media coverage of the annual shopping frenzy and the beginning of the Christmas season.

It is a beginning in the strictest sense of the word for me, and my heart fills with dread and anguish as I look toward the coming month of greatest joy with the deepest of sadness, remembering my husband John's death a few months ago.

One morning he left the house for his weekly tennis game, only to collapse and die within thirty minutes following an hour's play. I remember viewing the remainder of that day, and my life ever since, as through shattered glass. To put it simply, nothing for me will ever be the same again. How I have lived through the intervening months is a mystery and a miracle. I suppose it is simply a matter of putting one foot in front of the other and relying on my own resources, the encouragement of friends, and the strength of God. In retrospect I have no idea how I managed. Now in the days of waning light and falling temperatures, I am challenged both by faith and custom to deck the halls and to be jolly.

I am reminded, in the Evening Prayer antiphon from today's *Liturgy of the Hours*, of Gabriel's admonition to Mary not to be afraid. But her unease was of a different sort, and involved the stirrings of hope and awe, rather than despair and emptiness. She was looking forward, and I am looking back. All of Advent teaches us to look ahead, and, if possible, to overlook the shallow, secular enticements of food, gifts and parties and instead to anticipate with wonder and humility the birth of the tiny child in Bethlehem. Yet my looking back is almost instinctive, as I remember nearly forty Christmases as a wife and face my first one as a widow. The backwash of emptiness and longing and the feeling of being totally overwhelmed are almost more than I can bear.

My hope is to find some kind of guidance, as the Magi did, to illuminate my path and to help me to realize that the great joy and peace of Christmas transcends our human condition. Whether it is our spouse, child, parent, sibling, or dear friend who has died, we are being drawn into the light of the eternal God, even as we continue our struggle toward him on earth in our darkness and sorrow.



*Lead, Kindly Light, amidst the tumult and gloom,*

*Lead Thou me on;*

*The night is dark, and I am far from home,*

*Lead Thou me on.*

**Cardinal John Henry Newman**

## SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*In the snow, under the fall of snow, the world becomes an Advent place, waiting quietly, waiting for whatever destiny the snow may bring.*

Mitch Finley, *Season of Promises*

I REMEMBER AS A CHILD the wonderful silence outdoors after a blizzard. Sounds were muffled as if the world was wrapped in cotton. That lovely frozen fluff on the ground absorbed the normally harsh noises of daily life, and everything sounded as though it was through a closed door. The stillness was beautiful. Everything seemed slower and calmer.

Silence can be upsetting, too. There is nothing so still as even a small home where a loved one lived and now has died. Those who are left alone feel imprisoned and invisible. With no other human life to share, with no sounds of running water, turning pages, footsteps, or voices, we can quickly feel tremendously isolated. Even now I listen for the most common noises—a laugh, a beer-can tab being pulled, the rustle of the newspaper. There is not a single sound and I feel entombed.

The saintly Mahatma Gandhi wrote: *“In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.”* It’s true that silence not only allows one to think, but also to digest those thoughts, make plans, and evaluate one’s circum-

stances. It seems that since John's death, I can think of nothing else. The silence makes his absence more pronounced, perhaps because I am unconsciously listening for indications that he is there. The emptiness is engulfing and my modest house seems as large as a castle. But although I feel isolated, I also feel, sometimes more keenly than others, that somehow he is with me, and that free from his earthly bonds he views me from eternity and knows what is going on inside my head. And, conversely, I can talk to him and share my thoughts and even ask his guidance and advice. It's a fact that John is no longer here. But he is with God, and God is here; therefore, in a way which we cannot understand, John is also here. I talk to him, often aloud, without guilt or embarrassment.

Is this prayer? Certainly. Has this ever been done before? Countless times, both between those who have died and those left behind, and also between those who are yet to be born and those waiting for them. Our Lady spent nine months in meditation and prayer to the Infant growing in her womb, sharing in silence her thoughts of wonder, awe, humility, and perhaps more than a little uncertainty.

"Nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness," wrote Meister Eckhart, the great fourteenth century mystic. But this stillness mustn't simply be a vacuum, an absence of noise. It has to be an expectant, productive silence which is full of the sound of God. And what is the

sound of God? I liken it to the high frequency sound made by whistles that human ears can't hear, only canine ears. I think the sound of God is similar, because it doesn't resonate like ordinary conversation. Rather, it is the "tiny whispering sound" heard by the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:12) which is never more meaningful than during Advent, when the whole world seems to turn up its volume of noisy shoppers, carolers, and party-goers. The media screams about sales and bargains, parties and parades, lights and bands and revelry. Yet the Christ child was born in a remote barn, without any crowds, lulled to sleep by the soft, rhythmic sound of the animals' breathing.

We will never be in tune with the sound of God during Advent if we make so much noise that we can't hear Him. Advent means "coming," and if we don't want to miss his coming, we have to be quiet and listen.



*Silence is the strength of our interior life. . . . If we fill our lives with silence, then we will live in hope.*

**Thomas Merton**