



SHALL WE BEGIN?

I am so excited you decided to join me for this year's *Following the Star* retreat.

This is not your ordinary Advent Devotional.

This is for people who want something more substantial than the warm fuzzies - something lasting, something transformative.

I want to invite you to dig deep, to step back, and lean in. I invite you to embrace the quiet and the darkness and the cold, and *look up*. Remind yourself why you are Christian in the first place - because once upon a time, God deigned to become a helpless, tiny child, in a little town in Bethlehem.

And you are seeking Him.

Not gifts. Not parties. Not trappings, sweets, or competitions with the Jones's. This season is all about light and darkness, fire and vibrancy, quiet and meaning, calling and purpose. And it just might be that as we find ourselves beckoned by a star to approach the Light of the World, we find ourselves catching fire.

*The light shines in the darkness
and the darkness has not overcome it.*

- John 1:5



Light Pollution

WEEK ONE

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

He was in the beginning with God.

*All things came to be through Him and without Him nothing came to be.
What came to be through Him 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: 1-5



Adjusting to the Dark

WEEK TWO

*This is the verdict, the light
came into the world,
but the people preferred
darkness to light...*

- John 3:19

Write & Reflect



SUGGESTED JOURNAL PROMPTS:

- What does it mean to *desire* God? What are the things that are "filling" your life, thus weakening your desire for God?
- Have you ever thought before about what "sin" means? Does a change of perspective help your attitude toward confessing your sins?
- What is the biggest hurdle you will face in making it to confession this Advent? How can you overcome it?
- Additionally: Feel free to use this space to answer questions from your Examen (See P. 38-39).

*You have
made us
for
Yourself,
Oh Lord,
and our
hearts are
restless,
until they
rest in
You.
~Augustine*



Setting Out

WEEK THREE

*"They set out. And behold, the star they
had seen at its rising preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place
where the child was."*

- Matthew 2:9

WEEK 3: SETTING OUT...

The most important thing to realize this week is that this journey to Bethlehem is a journey of the *heart*. The Magi made a physical journey to Bethlehem, but our journey is not the same. Our journey is one of understanding Love, receiving Love, and overflowing with Love. This we show in the reciprocating and giving of Love - which, incidentally, is what makes us the most perfect image of God, since God is love (1 John 4:16). This is why we were created and why this makes us the happiest. *For everything that was created wants, in the depths of its being, to do what it was created to do.* - Frederick Hoffman



This reflection is so appropriate for this week, because of the *joy* that love brings us. We are joyful at the anticipation of Love incarnate come down to save us, but it should also make us joyful that this journey and this contact with that Love incarnate will be the source of our transformation, from artificial light to being on fire.

This journey of the heart is a process of falling in love. It's an opening and preparing my heart to "bond" with the baby who's coming at Christmas. And this week's reflection is simply about making this practical.

We all know the saying "*You can lead a heart to love, but you can't make it fall*". It can feel almost "despair worthy" when you think, "*Well, I just don't love God, and everybody else does. There must be something wrong with me*". But, not so. If you don't *feel* an overwhelming natural sense of love for God without any effort or cultivation whatsoever, you are actually quite NORMAL. If you've made an effort to "pretend" that you loved God but without much success, its probably because you just didn't know what to do to cultivate it.

It is true that we cannot just *will* ourselves to love, But, we were literally *created* to love God, so there must also be a *certain* hope that it is attainable. The fact that our hearts yearn is proof of this. However, it's not all fluffy tingles. This reflection will give us a better idea of what Love looks like, how it pursues us, and what it looks like to respond.

This is why an exploration of the five "love languages" here is so helpful, because it sets up a practical step by step path.

WEEK 3: SETTING OUT...



The “love languages” aren’t all created “equal” when it comes to God. There is, in fact, there is a distinct hierarchy that essentially forms a path or even a “ladder”, if you like the analogy, of steps or rungs that build on each other, with each subsequent one getting us closer to God than the previous.

*1) The first “love language” is **Gifts**.*

This is the intro to love. Often we notice the special things God gives us or does for us, usually without our asking, and we get all giddy inside. Gratitude naturally overflows, and we blush saying “God just loves me so much”... and then we buy a mug that says “Blessed Mama” on it.

This is the touchy, feely love in its earliest stages, and, sadly, it is where most people get stuck.

We become “comfortable” with constantly receiving gifts and, like any spoiled child, we become entitled and expectant. Then, because we aren’t responding to the invitation to the deeper Love the gifts were meant to present in the first place, they start to grow fewer and farther between. We start to believe that God has ceased to love us, and often we give up, or stop believing.

Instead of losing faith, we should attempt to view His gifts to us an invitation to equal generosity with Him. God will not be outdone in generosity. Try Him and see. This is our chance to respond with the classic offerings of “time, talent, & treasure”, trusting that He will be faithful.

A mini mindset shift...

Next time, the gifts are less obvious, we should take a step back and remind ourselves that this is merely an invitation to a deeper kind of relationship, one more intimate than mere externals.



Arrival

WEEK FOUR

*Upon entering into the house, they found the child with
Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him.
Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts;
gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

- Matthew 2:11



Arrival

ARE WE READY?

We have finally come to Week 4 of this Advent Retreat, our last week before Christmas. It is the week where we contemplate arriving at the manger where the Child is to be born.

What can we bring to Him? Or, will we arrive empty-handed? Why are we coming? Are we coming to gawk and stare, or with a thousand expectations of “what’s in it for me”? or are we going like the Wise Men, to offer our gifts?

Remember, this is **a journey of love, to Love**. And what is a simple entry level to love we talked about last week?

Gifts.

WEEK 4: ARRIVAL...



Our gift to the Christ Child this Christmas has the potential to be the beginning of a truly mutual love relationship with the God who pursues us, it can be our first simple, practical, intentional, and active response to His Love. Every relationship has a beginning. This gift is our first response to His call, but it can be the beginning of something great that extends far beyond this moment if we let it. (See Bonus Week: *Carrying Christmas into the New Year.*)

Maybe you don't know what to bring, or maybe you think you have nothing to offer, but God isn't looking for anything grandiose here, simply authentic.

Therefore, this week we need to contemplate what makes a good gift, and since we have been following the journey of the Magi, we will look to their gifts as examples.

THREE ASPECTS OF A GOOD GIFT:

1) It needs to have **MEANING**.

A good gift needs to be meaningful - both to the giver and the receiver. There needs to be purpose and intentionality behind the gift. It cannot be a gift just for show. The insincerity of a gift without meaning often feels like more of an insult than an act of love.

Each of the gifts of the Magi had significant meaning: **Gold**, for royalty; **Frankincense**, for deity; and **Myrrh**, for embalming the dead, which was, obviously, His purpose for coming and the culmination of His life's mission.

2) It needs to have **VALUE**.

The amount of sacrifice that is put into the offering of a gift matters. The **COST** of the gift almost always increases the meaningfulness of the gift. (We can use *cost* and *sacrifice* interchangeably here.) The sacrifice could be monetary but very often it is also not. Usually, the cost comes in the form of the amount of commitment, self-forgetfulness, or effort it takes to offer the gift.



Week 4: Challenge

TO DO:

- Decide your Gift
- Present your Gift (Prayer + Christmas Mass)
- Commit and Live

REFLECTION QUESTION:

- *What does He want from me this Christmas?*

- Take an honest inventory of your life in prayer, silence and reflection over the course of this week (not just on a single occasion). Consider several options and ask for light/guidance/peace about the one(s) He wishes you to offer. Start as soon as possible so as to give Him time and space to answer.

FILL IN THE BLANK:

Lord, I love Thee more than _____ (gift) _____

Or

Lord, I desire to love Thee more than _____ (gift) _____.

Prayer for Courage

My Lord,

Multiply my Love that it may overcome all my reservations.

Increase my assurance. Deepen my prayer.

Give me firm faith, sure hope, and,

Oh my God, be Thou my strength.

*"To love Him
with all your
heart,
with all your
understanding,
with all your
strength,
and to love
your neighbor
as yourself
is worth more
than all
burnt offerings
and sacrifices."
- Mark 12:33*

"People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

- 1 Samuel 16:7



Entering the New Year

LIFE AFTER TRANSFORMATION - BONUS WEEK -

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
the wise men returned to their homes by another route.*

- Matthew 2:12

BONUS WEEK: NEW YEAR...

hearts by pretending nothing ever happened, but then what was it for, this entire journey? Why make the effort?

Oh no, it's too late for complacency now, a Baby has been born in our hearts and our world can never be exactly the same.



LET'S MAKE THIS EXTREMELY PRACTICAL...

Remember that the way home is also a journey. It isn't instantaneous and it isn't magic. The journey home also requires effort and will contain obstacles and challenges, but it has a clear destination, home. You aren't trying to change your life, as in quit and start a completely new one, you are taking hold of what you've experienced in this journey and letting it affect the life you already have.

Fresh starts are the BEST - Mornings, Mondays, new months - and the New Year is no different. Why? They are new, motivating, full of potential, opportunities to leave the past behind and start again, except this time with renewed strength, increased knowledge, and clearer direction.

At this point most people probably realize that the typical "New Year's Resolutions" are essentially pointless. According to a study done by the university of Scranton, only somewhere around 19% of people actually manage to keep them and have them make lasting impact beyond that year. The people that do keep them, use a slow growth, habits based approach - rather than the fleeting, white knuckle, "I'm-amazing", muscle-through-and-conquer method.

If we desire truly impactful and enduring progress, clearly we should approach the New Year using the step-by-step, habit-building based approach. However, what if, this time, rather than pursuing preconceived goals, we combined this concept of habit stacking with the increasingly popular "Word-of-the-Year" idea? There is even one more thing that makes our approach unique. Instead of encouraging you to choose your word, what if this year you let the "Word choose you" - based on your Christmas Gift?

*In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God,
and the word was God.*

- John 1:1