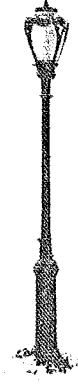


OBEDIENCE

Wait with this word for awhile before you turn the page. Let *Obedience* settle into your thoughts. Let this word soak into your life. Let it spread across your imagination as you look toward Christmas. Do not hurry. Wait. And when you have taken some time with this word, turn the page.

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT



DAY ONE

Responding to the Word *Obedience*

What is your first reaction to this word?

Describe your most recent experience of *obedience*.
Be as specific as possible.

What memories or stories from past Advent and Christmas seasons does this word, *obedience*, call forth from your life?

How might God desire you to practice *obedience* in these days
and weeks that lead toward Christmas?

INVOCATION

*Holy Obedience,
companion of trust,
enemy of fear;
undesired yet longed for;
resistible but irreplaceable.
You who cause ears to turn deadly deaf,
and, at once,
bring life to its grateful knees.
Come, O Obedience,
join us with the angels to listen for God's Advent
that we may hear our way.
Amen.*

SILENCE

REFLECTION ON OBEDIENCE

A tree grows in our backyard that is like no other tree. Were it not for winter, I might not see this tree for what it has become. In most seasons the trunk and branches are all but hidden behind a patchwork quilt of leaf and light. But in late autumn the distinctive form of the tree begins to be laid bare, revealing a life story to anyone who will pay attention.

The tree is tall, like most trees around it. At the trunk's widest girth, it is still narrow, and without strain I can put my arms around its trunk. With effort, I can shade my eyes against the winter sun, arch my neck, and look up to where its long, tapered fingertip branches seem to scrape the clouds. At the ground where the gray-brown trunk erupts from the soil, this tree looks like all the others in our yard—reaching arrow-straight toward the sky.

But once its leaves have surrendered to autumn's final chill, the light and clarity of winter reveal evidence of a different life lived in this one tree. Halfway up its height, a curve begins—not a slight

curve like a sliver of moon but a strong, clear curve like a child's hand cupped around some secret treasure. And then, after bending out and around and up for the length of at least twelve feet, the trunk grows straight again as if this peculiar detour had never appeared.

I can never know what set this tree off course; whether injury or disease in its trunk forced it to grow crooked for survival. Perhaps other trees, more mature and full of themselves, cast too great a shadow for this lone tree to easily find what it needed to live. But I do know that this tree followed the only path for which it was created, and that it did so by seeking and following the life source that is light.

Something along the way caught the attention of this tree, and for its life's sake, it obeyed the Creator's nudge and tug. Whatever pulled and called it into this unique curve, whatever it "listened" to deep inside, may have saved its life at one time. And now, when I see this tree during winter, I am reminded of how obedience to the Creator is really about turning toward the light and voice of God for life's sake.

May we live into the remainder of Advent attuned to the Creator's desires for our lives. May we seek times of Advent solitude, silence and prayer in which we bare our unique soul before the One who formed us to listen for guidance about who we are called to become. May we seek the light of God in Jesus Christ day by day, bending and turning toward Christ even if it makes us stand out from the Christmas crowds. May we learn to listen, in our own deep places for the voice of the One who loves us beyond measure.

HYMN OF OBEDIENCE

Sing or read the words of this Advent hymn. Attend to the words carefully. How do they stir up a sense of obedience for this season?

HAIL TO THE LORD'S ANOINTED

*Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free;
to take away transgression, and rule in equity.*

*He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong;
to help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong;
to give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light,
whose souls, condemned and dying, are precious in his sight.*

*He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth;
love, joy, and hope, like flowers, spring in his path to birth.
Before him, on the mountains, shall peace, the herald go,
and righteousness, in fountains, from hill to valley flow.*

*To him shall prayers unceasing and daily vows ascend;
his kingdom still increasing, a kingdom without end.
The tide of time shall never his covenant remove;
his name shall stand for ever; that name to us is love.*

—James Montgomery

BENEDICTION

Listen, for the Lord is very near! May the sound of his voice draw you closer and closer in obedient love—coming and going, waiting and watching, now and forever. Amen.



DAY TWO

Read Isaiah 7:10-16.

OBEDIENCE REQUIRES courage. At a time in which God's people were in need of courage and were feeling alone in an uncertain world, Isaiah gave them a sign that they were not alone. Immanuel, God-With-Us, who called them to be an obedient people, also promised to be a very present help to them in times of trouble if only they would have eyes to see. What signs in these weeks of Advent point you to the presence of God in your life? Where have you seen God-With-Us in the past week? How could you point someone you love toward God-With-Us before this day is done? Write down the signs and circumstances that come to mind and hold them in prayer.

Your reflections—



DAY THREE

Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19.

AS A SHEPHERD expects a flock to obey his voice, so God expects God's people to do the same. When the flock becomes distracted, it turns away from the shepherd, wandering into dangerous territory and risking life. The psalmist calls upon God the Shepherd to save the wandering flock of Israel, to restore the people to the divine tender care and guidance, and in return the people are expected to obey the voice of God, never again to turn away.

What is distracting your attention this season in ways that make it hard to attend to God's desires for your life? What has caught your eye that competes for God's attention? Take a piece of paper and sketch some of the distractions, or go through a magazine or newspaper and cut out pictures of items or images that tempt you away from following the voice of God. Offer a prayer for help in staying attentive to the voice and call of God this season.

Your reflections—



DAY FOUR

Read Romans 1:1-7.

TO BECOME A servant of Jesus Christ, as Paul professes to be, requires obedience. *Obedience* is based on the Greek verb that means “to hear.” So, to become obedient, we must hear something; we must be told something to do or to be or to believe. Paul has heard the “gospel of God,” the good news of God made known in Jesus Christ, and in a short seven verses, Paul summarizes that gospel for those who are hearing this letter.

Prayerfully reflect on who Jesus Christ is for you. Make a mental summary, or write down what you have come to believe about Jesus. What have you heard about him? Has the good news of Jesus influenced your way of living—what you do, who you are, what you believe? How? Who has told you this good news? Where have you heard it? Give God thanks for this gospel.

Your reflections—



DAY FIVE

Read Matthew 1:18-25.

IN SPITE OF the social stigma that would come from taking a wife already with child, Joseph did so. The news of Mary's pregnancy must have made his heart sink. He probably had plans and dreams for the family they would have together. The outrageous story she told him about how she had conceived must have shattered his tender trust in this young girl about to become his wife. He had heard enough and was about to say no to Mary. Yet deep within, Joseph was able to listen for another word about Mary, about himself, and about what God needed them to do. And from that deep listening, that deep prayerful place of "obedience," Joseph changed his mind and his answer. His Advent no became an Advent yes.

When have you said no to God at first but later responded yes? What changed your mind? Did your yes lead you to act in a different way? Consider whether any invitation presents itself now in your faith journey. How are you responding? Have you said yes, or have you been saying no despite a nudging toward yes? What might come of a yes to this invitation, your obedience to what God asks of you? Offer your thoughts to God and listen for a word of encouragement toward faithful obedience.

Your reflections—



DAY SIX

The Waiting World

FROM A PRACTICAL perspective, obedience is about doing what we are told to do. Practicing obedience as a spiritual discipline calls for a rhythm of regularly being obedient, of making room to listen for and act on what we are told to do on an ongoing and persistent basis. During the remainder of this season of Advent and into the season of Christmas, make a regular practice of listening to the needs of the creation by attending to a daily news source. Commit to this practice. If you already listen and read the news with the intent of hearing God's call, add a time of prayer before and after each news report or reading. A prayer could be as simple as: *Creator God, help me to have eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to hold your world with you. Amen.*

Prepare yourself before listening or reading by shifting into an attitude of prayer: close your eyes for a moment; take a long, slow breath in and out; then listen to or read the news. Attend to the needs of creation as presented in the news—of people, places, and circumstances—with an ear attuned to how God hears these needs. Afterward, pray for creation and for the new creation about to be born through the coming of Christ.

Your reflections—



DAY SEVEN

Praying in Obedience

It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night.

—Psalm 92:2

A DAILY OFFICE

There may be no better prayer practice to begin a new Christian year than a *daily office*. A daily routine for prayer, something simple, predictable, on a set rhythm and schedule can cultivate a deep practice of obedience: of listening for and hearing God's presence in the daily. The root of the word *obedience* means just this—to hear. The intent of practicing a daily office is to spend disciplined time with God, showing up at a set time alone or in community, so that a habit of prayer is established.

A daily office, often called *praying the hours*, is a set rhythm and format of prayer by which a community or individual goes obediently to God in prayer at regular intervals during the day. It might include simply morning and evening prayer; a schedule of morning, midday, and evening prayer; or a more extended daily office with as many as nine prayer times such as those practiced in many monastic orders. The time of each office should be consistently observed, even if practiced in solitude, because the rhythm and obedience of the practice are as much gifts as the content.

The content of a daily office can vary according to design by the individual or community. Most often a daily office includes a rhythm of silence, reading the psalms and other scriptures, the Lord's Prayer, along with prayers of praise, petition, and intercession, all framed by an invocation and benediction. But in fact a daily office can be as simple as coming to prayer in silence, reading a Psalm, and prayers of gratitude and petition once a day.

How better to greet Immanuel, God-With-Us, in the new year than by daily practicing to be-with-God? May this rhythm of prayer, begun in Advent, help us "hear" God daily.

A GUIDE TO THE PRACTICE OF A DAILY OFFICE

If your group or community can commit to this practice during Advent, I urge you to. Although an individual daily office opens up life with God in new ways, a communal commitment—even if just for a season, a week, or a few days—provides a particular blessing. Either way, alone or with friends, the practice will be a gift.

First determine the hours you will be in prayer. A morning and evening schedule is a good starting place. Arrange the times to accommodate your other practices and schedule. You may decide to have morning prayer at 7:00 AM or at 10:00 AM and to have afternoon or evening prayer at 4:00 PM or at 7:00 PM. If practicing alone, you might try a daily rhythm of morning, midday, and evening prayer. Again, the rhythm of your daily office can be determined by you or your group, but it is important to choose times you can observe each day over the period in which you will try this prayer practice. Part of the experience is the daily return to the same time and place to meet God and one another.

If your group wants to experience a daily office but cannot meet together, consider designing a schedule in which each person practices independently at the same times of day. For example, while at home or work, you and your friends could be in prayer at 6:00 AM, noon, and 5:30 PM each day individually, together. Knowing others are in prayer with you, even when apart, can be a powerful experience.

Whether in solitude or with a group, the format can be simple. Use a prayer book as your guide (see Resources for possibilities), or design your office according to the pattern on the next page. For scripture readings, the Revised Common Lectionary is recommended as your guide, but you may select readings if you prefer.

PATTERN FOR A DAILY OFFICE

- Gather in Silence and light a candle as a sign of the Light of Christ being present.
- Invocation

Morning

Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning,
for in you I put my trust.
Teach me the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul. (Ps. 143:8)

Evening

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Ps. 139:11-12)

- Read a Psalm
- Silence
- Read a scripture passage
- Silence
- Prayers of petition and intercession (an open time for prayers) followed by the Lord's Prayer (in unison)
- Blessing

Morning

May the love and light of God go with you into this new day. Amen.

Evening

May the Spirit of God embrace you this night in ways that bring you peace. Amen.