

Awaiting His Presence

The Gift of Human Life

Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6

Today's readings invite us to reflect on the gift of human life as we await the celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas and the return of Jesus at the end of the world.

The first reading transports us back in time to the Babylonian captivity when the people of Israel were led into slavery by their enemies. During their exile, the people clung to the promise that God would restore their dignity and bring them back to Jerusalem in glory.

In the second reading, St. Paul wrote to the Philippians from a prison cell. He had been badly treated during his stay in Philippi, but it did not diminish the love he felt for the Christian community there. He urged them to grow in love and to discern what is important in life, so they would remain pure and blameless.

The circumstances surrounding these two readings remind us that slavery, maltreatment, and the imprisonment of an innocent man are three unjust assaults on the gift of human life. We believe that we are created in the image



of God and that human life is sacred from its conception to its natural end. Most Catholics know that in addition to abortion and euthanasia there are other life issues that demand our attention such as assisted suicide, capital punishment, unjust war, genetic engineering, and any kind of injustice.

We also know that God gave human beings an intellect and the freedom to choose between good and evil. No one is perfect. We all make mistakes. We have the ability to separate ourselves from God and to hurt other people in the things we say or do. When this happens, we insult and damage our own human dignity. But God never abandons us. We are his children. He loves us unconditionally. He waits patiently for us to repent and turn back to him.

In the Gospel reading, St. John the Baptist reminds us that repentance for the forgiveness of sins restores our relationship with God and one another. We are called to straighten our paths, to fill the valleys of doubt and despair, to knock down mountainous obstacles, to smooth out the rough edges of our lives and await the salvation of God.

Pope Francis teaches: "The great gift of life is the first gift we have received. Sometimes in life we risk forgetting about this.... It is ... great joy to feel at every stage in life, in every situation, in every social condition, that we are, and we remain, sons and daughters. This is the message that children give us by their very presence: simply by their presence they remind us that each and every one of us is a son or daughter."

POINTS TO PONDER

In what ways are you enslaved or imprisoned by thoughts, habits, or actions that separate you from God or other people?

How do you feel called to repentance during this Advent season?

How do you honor and respect the gift of life?

FEAST DAYS THIS WEEK

• **December 12 — Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.** This feast day commemorates the appearance of Our Lady to a Mexican peasant named Juan Diego. No one believed that he had seen Our Lady. He was told to go back and ask for a sign. Our Lady instructed him

to go to a nearby hilltop where he found roses in bloom — even though it was December! Today is a great day to have a Mexican dinner with real or artificial roses as a centerpiece. After dinner, read about Juan Diego.

• **December 13 — Feast of St. Lucy.** St. Lucy was a fourth-century martyr whose name and feast are associated with light. In Norway, children light candles and bring pastries to their parents on the morning of St. Lucy's feast day. In Sweden, they eat a ginger cookie. In Italy, St. Lucy brings small gifts to good children. In Hungary, wheat seeds are planted in a small pot, then children watch the wheat grow and use the sprigs in the manger of their family's Christmas crèche.



Who Is John the Baptist?

John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus. His parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, had been unable to have children. One day, Zechariah was told by the angel Gabriel that he and Elizabeth would have a son and they should name the baby John. The angel promised that the boy “will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God” (Lk 1:16). When John grew up, he lived in the wilderness and preached a message of repentance. He baptized people with water for the forgiveness of sins, but he promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned ...

If you haven't gone to confession in a while, Advent is the perfect time to reconcile yourself with God and the Church. Most parishes have communal penance services with prayers and Scripture readings, followed by the opportunity for individual confession. Or you can make a private appointment with a priest.

Your preparation for confession should include an examination of conscience, which simply involves thinking back on sins you have committed since your last confession.

If it has been a long time since your last confession and you're not sure how to proceed, don't worry. Just tell the priest; he will guide you through the process. What you will experience is the healing gift of God's love, the chance to start over with a clean conscience, and an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

Advent Prayer

God of love and mercy, thank you for the gift of human life. Help me to recognize your presence in all people. Give me the courage to repent and seek forgiveness when I have hurt you or another person. Allow me to remain totally dependent upon you in every aspect of my life. Amen.

FAMILYFOCUS



Read aloud the Scripture account of John the Baptist: Luke 1:5–25 and Luke 3:1–20.

Ask each family member what he or she liked about this Scripture passage.

At bedtime, take turns blessing everyone in the family with holy water.

Respecting Human Life

Here are some ways to celebrate the gift of human life during Advent:

1. Bring food to a local homeless shelter.
2. Clean out closets and toy bins. Donate gently used items to a local refugee center.
3. Buy a Christmas gift for a needy child.
4. Donate money to a right-to-life group.
5. Write letters to elected officials expressing concerns about abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty.
6. Visit friends or relatives in a nursing home.
7. Bake cookies for a homebound neighbor.