Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



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Advent is my favorite liturgical season, a chance to slow down and prepare my heart to receive the mystery of the Incarnation. It is, indeed, a mystery.

"Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me!" wrote author Madeline L'Engle in a reflection on *A Sky Full of Children*. "It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine."

Truth be told, I am a fan of mysteries. I recently realized that the reason I so enjoy reading mystery novels is because, by the end, you've figured out "who done it." It's satisfying. You can put it back on the shelf when you're finished. There are no loose ends to keep you up at night, unlike in real life.

The mystery of the Incarnation, however, isn't that kind of mystery. It's not a mystery that we solve through rational thought, clues, or detective skills. Rather, it's a mystery we sink into, thereby readying to be transformed ourselves.

The cultural soup in which we swim can make it difficult to stay grounded in the spirit of Advent. The 24-hour Christmas music stations started broadcasting before Thanksgiving. Many families have already decked the halls of their homes, inside and out. Advent invites us first to deck the halls of our hearts as we prepare the way for the in-breaking of the beloved, once again, as if for the first time.

I have centered my own spiritual practice during the past few Advents on my desire to welcome the Prince of Peace. How might I incarnate peace in my own heart, self and life? After all, the gift of the Incarnation is the greatest gift of all, divinity and humanity tied together in the person of Jesus, Prince of Peace. There is a sacred promise present within each of us, given by Christ, to be peace bearers ourselves, even as we hold lightly and gently our own humanity, our brokenness, and the wounded people and places of our world, yearning for peace.

"So as far as a human being can," wrote St. John Chrysostom in a homily, circa 386-397, "you must do what Christ the Son of God did, and become a promoter of peace both for yourself and for your neighbor."

In the tradition of my religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, we say that peace is also a gift, given in Christ. It is a gift for you, and me, and everyone. It

is not a gift to be hoarded or hidden. It's a perpetual gift, one that we unwrap again and again, but also one that we must nurture in our hearts and relationships, even or especially when it is not the easy path.

"Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace," Pope Francis tells us in *Gaudete et Exsultate*. "Christ himself wants to experience this within you, in all the efforts and sacrifices that entails, but also in the joy and enrichment it brings."

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Such promise. And then there is real life and its challenges. We dip in and out of being at peace, within and among ourselves — mostly out, if you're like me.

Given the challenges we face, how might we incarnate peace this Advent season?

We need time and space to prepare our hearts to receive the gift of peace. Ideally, of course, I've heard that 20 minutes of meditation is transformative. Yet it can even be as simple as a pause after a difficult conversation, a frustrating conference call, or when you finally arrive in your driveway after a traffic filled journey. Pause. Give thanks. Pray for the openness to receive the Prince of Peace. Pray for those you just encountered. Hold them in peace.

The spirit of the Advent and Christmas seasons also invite us to reach out and bring peace to others. This might take the form of a card or visit to someone who is lonely. It might be something that takes more risk, like offering an apology where it is due or even forgiveness where it is elusive. Your own life and relationships will point the way.

I have yet to discover the secret formula for incarnating peace. In my experience, it's something we stumble our way towards. Yet, there are also guideposts and role models who point the way. Advent can be a lovely time to read the writings of peacemakers, such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, or Martin Luther King. It can be a time to give thanks and reflect on special persons in your own life who have modeled peace for you. How do they inspire you to incarnate peace in your own life?

Towards the end of his life, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, one of my models of peace, wrote:

> What I would like to leave behind is a simple prayer that each of you may find what I have found — God's special gift to us all: the gift of peace. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be most fully who we are, even in the worst of times. We let go of what is nonessential and embrace what is essential. We empty ourselves so that God may more fully work within us.

May each of us let go of what is nonessential and incarnate peace this Advent season. May we sink into the mystery of the Incarnation, emptying ourselves so that the Prince of Peace may more fully work within and among us. Amen.

[Susan Rose Francois is a member of the Congregation Leadership Team for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace. She was a Bernardin scholar at Catholic Theological Union and has ministered as a justice educator and advocate. Read more of her work on her blog, At the Corner of Susan and St. Joseph.]

This story appears in the **Advent** feature series. View the full series.