

## **2nd Week of Advent - God's Invitation to Love**

**Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers**

Hello, I'm Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, and let us begin with prayer.

### **Opening Prayer**

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Lord, God and Father, we thank you for bringing us here this day for this time of prayerful reflection and meditation on the great mystery of your love for each and every one of us, as if we were the only person that has ever existed. Lord, as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ during this season of Advent, let us be filled with your Holy Spirit.

Give us a greater share of that spirit, just as Elisha asked from Elijah, he asked for a double portion of what he received from the Lord, and so, Lord, we ask you for the same. We ask you for a double portion of your love and your mercy and your grace to help us, to prepare us, to get our hearts and our minds ready so that we can truly love you with all of our mind, all of our soul, all of our hearts, all of our wills, so we can be powerful witnesses of that love to the world that is hurting, that is broken, that needs the sign and the witness of your dearly beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So we honor you, and we bless you and we praise you. Thank you Jesus, Amen. In the name of Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

### **The Lord Knows We Need Him**

You know, Advent is a time of great anticipation and excitement, for we know that the Lord is near. Our preparation for His coming doesn't include developing plans and processes and procedures like we may do in our workplace, but making sure that our homework is done, that our chores are done, but rather it's opening our hearts to God's loving and life-giving and holy will in our lives. It's making room in our souls for God's Holy Spirit to work in and through us to help make the Kingdom of God present in today's world.

You know, the Lord knows that our world needs His presence especially now, especially coming out of the pandemic with all of the anxiety, and the fear and the mental anguish that so many young people are experiencing. You know, now I've begun speaking again. You know, I run into so many young people that don't know, that truly don't know how much God really loves them. It's so sad to see, and the mental health issues that they're dealing with, what they need is God's love. They need the witness of God's presence and His mercy active to realize that God is real, that He's there, you know, and we can help facilitate that. But we have to prepare ourselves for the work that God is calling us to do, to make ready to receive the King.

## The River of Life

John the Baptist reminds us that we must look and listen. That we have to pay attention to the voice crying out from the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord, "make straight His paths", turning away from and repenting of our sins.*"

You know, sometimes, you know, when I'm out in nature, you know, and I grew up in the city, you know, and now I live in a beautiful state, where there's lots of mountains and rivers and wildlife, and although honestly, I'm not a wildlife person, you know, I do like to get out because it is beautiful, right? And it's a wonderful experience of God's creation. And I've been paying attention, particularly to rivers.

You know, rivers flow and sometimes there's the river, there's a part of river that takes a little offshoot, you know, there's like a branch that goes off from the river and down into the woods, that's called a tributary. And sometimes, you know, things that are going down the river get diverted down the tributary, and it's no longer flowing downstream, it's flowing off, you know, on this little side route. And the same thing happens with us, doesn't it? If we're honest, you know, we're traveling down this river of life, you know, toward our ultimate end, our ultimate meaning, our ultimate purpose, you know, living with God forever in Heaven, and sometimes in life we get a little sidetracked.

You know, we see that tributary on the side of the river of life, and we say, "Hey, I wonder what's down here." And we start to maybe take a diversion and explore things in our lives, or experience things that take us away from God, that takes us away from our ultimate meaning, our ultimate purpose. And this is what St. John the Baptist is reminding us of in these Gospels and preparing us for Christmas and turning away from our sins.

## We Must Trust God

John is the herald of Christ who is to come, and reminds us that if we live in accordance with our own desires apart from God's will, then we will become blinded to the truth. So in order to respond faithfully when God calls us, we must trust God and allow ourselves to become vulnerable before the God who made us, that beautiful gift of vulnerability, because that's what the cross is all about. It appears, you know, on the outside looking in that it's a sign of defeat. It's a sign of anxiety, but really it's a sign of love, because it's in that vulnerability where we find strength.

You know, and Paul reminds us of this in 2 Corinthians. He was afflicted with something. We don't know what it was, it might have been a chronic illness or something, but he wanted God to take it away from him. And he pleads for God that, you know, he tells us that he pleaded to God to take this, you know, out of his life. But he said that God, he felt this interior prayer that God was saying to him that "*My power is made perfect in weakness.*" It's when I'm weak, it's then that I'm strong, right? Because it's in that vulnerability that we recognize that it's not our own

## Pray More Advent Retreat 2022 - Transcript

strength, that we need God's strength, and we need to rely on God's power, God's love, God's mercy, to get us through the most difficult challenges in our lives to overcome obstacles that sometimes prevent us and move us away from God's love.

### **He is Always There With Us**

You know, often I am counseling people that are struggling with certain things in their lives, and often people have experienced a tragedy in the past that moved them away from the church. You know, in fact they're very honest about that's the reason why they left the church, because this terrible tragedy happened, and "Where was God during that time? "Why didn't God help me? "You know, why didn't God help my loved one?" You know, and it's a very painful thing to go through something like that. And because you don't feel God's presence, where is God right now? And that's hard.

I've experienced that myself. The death of one of my closest and dearest friends, the best man at my wedding, and I was also the best man at his wedding. We've known each other since we were 10 years old. And we lost him at 38 years old, 38 years old to cancer, a very aggressive form of small cell lung cancer. And I loved him. I loved him like he was my own brother, you know? And to be honest with you, I had a hard time praying during that time.

You know, I really struggled to understand why God would allow something like that. So I totally get when people feel that God is not there, of course He's always there, He's always with us. He's always there loving us. Jesus, I think experienced the cross, so that He can know what it's like for us to experience the pain and anguish of going through something difficult, we feel that God is not there, you know? So if we are to bear good fruit in this life we must trust God enough to come before Him with sorrow, with repentance, in reconciliation and in love, to the sacrament of reconciliation, and not be afraid to expose the deepest parts of who we are. So that God's love can shine forth in, and through the unique and special person that He created me to be.

It means saying with Christ, "I have not come to do my own will, "but the will of Him who sent me", right? So it's with repentance and conversion where we open ourselves to God's will in our lives, where we lovingly accept God's plan for us, for each and every one of us.

### **We Need God's Help**

So during these few short weeks of Advent, as we embrace this period of preparation and transformation we may be faced with spiritual challenges, as our faith is tested, as we seek the path that God is destined for our lives. So in order to walk humbly before our God in the obedience of faith, right? The obedience of faith is when we listen to the voice of God and allow that voice to change our lives. We must appreciate the fact that we cannot do this all on our own. That we need God's help every step of the way, right?

## Pray More Advent Retreat 2022 - Transcript

Because as Jesus took those steps toward the cross He even needed help, right? Jesus needed help carrying His cross. So what makes us think that we can do this all on our own? You know, look, being strong doesn't mean that I can do something by myself without help. Being strong means being humble enough to be able to recognize that I do need help. Like I see this a lot with marriages.

You know, there are marriages that are troubled, and often, I'm maybe stereotyping a little here, but it's often the guy who's reluctant to go to therapy, even maybe just to talk to a priest, you know, or to a counselor to seek help, because "No I don't need anybody to shrink me. I don't need anybody to tell me what to do", but sometimes, look, the strength comes from recognizing that we do need help. That we do need help, and God extends His loving mercy so intimately and so personally with an overabundance and overflow of His grace, all we have to do is say yes, to open ourselves to saying yes to God's love working, active, and present. So in other words, God's calling us to a new life, right?

### **Surrender Everything to Him**

So a new life means that we have to get rid of the old, just as faith requires us to surrender everything to God. Now, surrendering and letting go, especially of the hurts of the past, especially of those things that separate us from God's love, is not always easy, and we must look to Jesus as our example of what it means to make a gift of our life, right? Because it's in giving ourselves away in love that we truly find ourselves in God.

We have to take our hands off the steering wheel, and let God drive. You know, it's scary enough when my kids were learning to drive right? You know, we have to have that trust, you know, there because you know, they need to know it and they need to learn. And the same thing is true of us. We need to let go of the steering wheel of our lives, and let God drive, right? What was that song that, I think that country song Jesus Take the Wheel? You know? There's a lot of truth to that, you know? And this time of Advent preparation, this time of contemplation, this time of repentance and prayer is a time for us to let go, to finally let go, of all those things that separate us from God's love.

We must empty ourselves of sin so that God can fill us with His love. And that's really the power of the sacrament of reconciliation, the emptying of sin, of separation from God, so we make more room and more space in our hearts to receive a deeper gift of God's love in our own lives. We must die to the ways the thinking of this world so that Christ can live in us. And we know how difficult that is.

### **He is Truth**

You know, we want to be accepted by the culture, right? We want to be accepted by those around us. But often we can't accept what the culture is saying. You know, we have to be

## Pray More Advent Retreat 2022 - Transcript

counter-cultural. We have to live the truth of our faith in love, right? Ephesians 4:15, "Live the truth in love", but it has to be the truth.

You know, God the Father did not send His Son so that His teachings could be influenced and changed by society, by the culture. But the Word became flesh to transform the culture with His truth because He is truth itself. *"I am the way, the truth and the life."* So truth is not an idea that I form in my mind. Truth is not a philosophical construct. Truth is ultimately a person, the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So when we live in His truth the truth will do what? Set us free. Set us free to love, maybe love more deeply than we've ever loved before. That's the opportunity we have during this season of Advent.

### **Evangelization**

So as Catholics initiated into our life of faith by the Holy Spirit and fire, right? The fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit that covered those flood waters, the waters of baptism that destroyed and washed away sin, and filled us with God's life, with sanctifying grace right? The grace that we need to get to Heaven. So as we respond to that grace in our lives, we are called to evangelize, right? To be living witnesses of the truth and the love of the infant Jesus, and to make God's presence known in the world each in our own way.

So everyone's not called to witness to God's love and truth the way that I am, everybody's called differently and one person's way is not better than the others. But let's take a step back and talk about this evangelization for a second. That's a huge buzzword, isn't it, in the church today, evangelization, we have to be about the new evangelization that both St. Paul VI and St. John Paul II called for, this new way of witnessing to God's love.

So the word evangelization means good news, right? Evangelion in Latin. And it was good news that was proclaimed, right? Except when Caesar, the King proclaimed news. Why, because news from the king, from the ruler could change your life. And we serve the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. So the life-giving news of Jesus Christ is not just good news, it's news that can truly change and transform our lives, right?

So evangelization is about the life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, right? And that's the news that we need to bring. That Christ can truly change your life. They can truly transform your life when we open ourselves like the door up in the door of our hearts to be more receptive to His love in our lives.

So if true justice and the fullness of peace is to flourish on our time, then we have to stand up and defend the truth, so that as St. Paul tells us the unbelievers all around us might be glorified in God's mercy, right? And so we have to be the witnesses of His truth and His love. We can't look like or think like or act like the culture around us.

## Be an Instrument of God

I remember one time when I was working as the public safety director for a major school district, and it was during the time there was a number of school shootings happening, and I remember going to most of the schools throughout the school district, and doing safety and security evaluations and also trainings, you know, for the staff. And I remember coming out of 12:05 mass, just afternoon, and someone tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around, it was one of the teachers from one of the schools I had been to. I didn't recognize who it was, but she said to me, "I knew there was something about you." And I said, "Excuse me?" And she said, "You had come and done an evaluation, security evaluation at the school, and I can tell by your presentation that you cared about us, that you weren't just concerned for the school district's physical assets, right? And buildings and things, but that you actually cared about us."

Now, I didn't mention God or Jesus, or faith once during those presentations, but because I try to live that eucharistic faith in the world to be that witness of God's love in the way that I work, in the way that I witness, you know, and again, not overtly, you know, but just by the witness of my life, people can tell that there's something different, that something within us sets us apart from everything else that's going on around us, and people draw hope from that, right? People draw hope from that. They draw inspiration from that. Again, we're just instruments. God is a musician and Advent is a time to allow us to become finely tuned instruments in God's hands.

So Jesus alone can fill the valley of of hatred and despair that we experience in our world and lay low the mountains of hills of suffering of injustice. We must look at our lives with the eyes of Christ, and not with the eyes of the world that lives in the passing shadow of the here and now, that wants to remove Christ from Christmas. It is often said that the eyes are the gateway to the soul. So let us be awake and alert for the coming of God's Kingdom into our lives. Let us wipe away the sleep of sin from our eyes and from our souls, and be awake to the power of God's love in our lives, so that when the Lord comes, He will not find us asleep, but ready and waiting with faith, and hope, and love, ready to live in His presence forever. Amen.