

Advent 2016: In Praise of Light



I am the Light of the World John 8: 12

. . . All praise be Yours, my Lord, through all that You have made.

And first, my Lord, Brother Sun Francis of Assisi

Advent Reflections 2016: In Praise of Light

This Advent material focuses on the gifts of Light and energy. These reflections are intended to help individuals and groups deepen their appreciation of the power, warmth, passion, and mystery of fire and light this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate the presence of the Light of the World — at Christmas and in our hearts!

Directions for convener:

Ask each participant to bring a vigil or small candle; have extras just in case. (Try to avoid paraffin, a petroleum product that causes pollution; use beeswax instead because it smells good, doesn't pollute, is cost-efficient because of burning time, and supports healthy bee colonies and beekeepers.) Adapt this material in any way that will be helpful for the group. Plan the timing. Make copies for each participant using both sides of sustainable paper,. Have name cards if helpful. When music is used, be creative to avoid printing copies. Create a centerpiece with a large candle. Assign readers as suits the group.

Possible music for use any week:

"Christ, Circle Round Us," Dan Schutte

"Come, Lord Jesus," M.D. Ridge

"All Is Light," Jan Novotka, on Awakening Consciousness (www.JanNovotka.com)

"Let Us Bear Your Holy Light," Kathy Sherman, on A Language of the Heart
(www.ministryofhearts.org)

Prepare for Week One: Prepare to view *Journey of the Universe* trailer (2.36 min.): www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/film-trailer or 10 - 15 minutes of the video (www.JourneyoftheUniverse.org).

Prepare for Week Three: Prepare media on fracking such as "Time for an Energy Change" (12.26 min.): <http://ecospiritualityresources.com/media> [Created for SHCJ in 2012, so some facts are dated.] music video (2.32 min): <https://www.propublica.org/series/fracking>

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Scripture is from New Revised Standard Version



First Week of Advent: First Light

World AIDS Day, Dec. 1 • Women Martyrs of El Salvador, Dec. 2

I. Introduction

Each introduces him/herself. Note days listed above. Settle any necessary decisions (e.g., refreshments, timing). Scan all pages. Light center candle and each participant's. Silently remember the enfolding presence of the Holy. Use breathing, music, and/or whatever assists the group. Leader prays aloud to be attentive to the Spirit, for those present, and for all those using this resource in many countries. Then someone reads the Scripture excerpt:

... the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. . . . Rom. 13:12

Silent reflection followed by sharing: What are your feelings about Advent? What "night is far gone" for you, or what night would you like to be gone? Extinguish candles.

II. Input

To better understand Light, we need, first, simple awareness. Electricity deprives us of an experience that billions of humans back through time have shared: gazing in awe at the Milky Way Galaxy, our home. People in cities do not have ample darkness to see the sweep of stars; some have never seen them! If you can remember when you first noticed the stars — or a memorable sighting — share the experience and your reaction? Why?



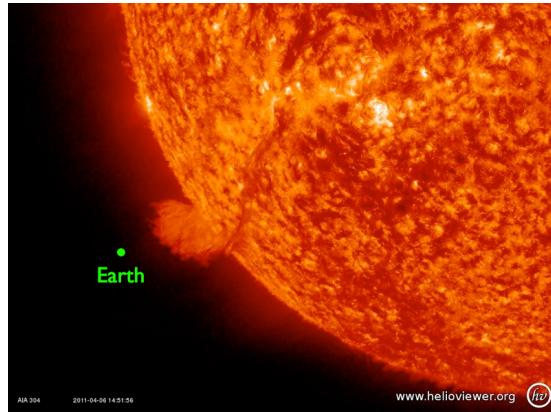
Most recently, scientists have learned that the observable universe began 13.82 billion years ago, a single immense energy event. Within our expanding Universe with its billions of galaxies is our Milky Way Galaxy. Within this galaxy is our solar system, and within it is our Sun, a star about a million times the size of Earth. It is one of the trillions of stars in one of the billions of galaxies in an intrinsically interconnected universe.

"The spectacular truth encoded in your DNA is that the very atoms of your body were initially forged in long-dead stars. This is why, when we look at the sky with wonder and longing, we feel some ineffable tugging at our innards. We are star stuff." Neil de Grasse Tyson

Each second our Sun gives part of itself to become energy that we eat at each meal and use for energy; it is reborn as the vitality of Earth. For millions of years, humans and other creatures have been basking in its warmth and feasting on its energy stored in the form of seeds,

nuts, and berries. The actual energy coursing through our circulatory and nervous systems was bestowed upon us by the Sun.

Take a moment to study this image of Earth in relation to our Sun. As Earth rotates, Sun remains relatively steady, and we realize that current knowledge causes the terms "sunrise" and "sunset" to be outdated and misleading. Point to the direction in which you/Earth are turning right now.



According to Neil Douglas-Klotz, "heaven" in Aramaic is not a place, but the image of "the light and sound shining through all creation." How might that affect the "where" of God?

Many poets have connected light with divinity. Below is a segment of "Choruses from The Rock," T. S. Eliot's reflection about light. Read it silently several times. Someone can then read the poem out loud.

*O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.
O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less:
The eastern light our spires touch at morning,
The light that slants on our western doors at evening,
The twilight over stagnant pools at batfly,
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.
O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!*

III. Share your reaction to any of the readings or images from Week One. What role do you imagine the sun, stars, and moon played in Jesus' life?

IV. Suggestions for this week: Use your candle at home to remind you of Light Invisible. Before meals, give thanks for "the Greater Light," for the Light of Christ, for our Sun, for the sunshine we eat, the sunshine that energizes the molecules in our bodies. Next week, bring your candle and any quote about Light from Scripture.

V. Closing:

Watch a segment of *Journey of the Universe*. Allow a few minutes to share reactions.

Socialize.

Second Week of Advent: Christ Light

St. Nicholas, Dec. 6 • Mary's Conception, Dec. 8 • International Human Rights Day, Dec. 10

I. Introduction

Introduce any new participants. Note dates above. Light candles. Remember the presence of God whatever way assists the group to become recollected. Leader prays aloud to be attentive to the Spirit, for those present, and for all those using this resource in many countries. Then someone reads the Scripture excerpt:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and lion and fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.* Isaiah 11:6

Silent reflection followed by sharing: What is your reaction to that reading? Extinguish candles.

II. Input

Light and fire have held mystery since the beginning of time. Fire has purified and made sacred. It has symbolized immortality, the Spirit of God, and a passionate love of life and people. Light has long been an important metaphor and title for Jesus. One Advent antiphon begins "O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice . . ." Many Christmas carols and hymns celebrate Jesus' presence as the one who gives light. What are your favorites? What Scripture quotes include Jesus' talking about light?

The "enfleshing" of divine light is called "Incarnation." Within our lifetimes, many sciences have shown how interconnected all life is. Theologians have realized that God's presence did not "come down" when Jesus was born but, rather, that divine presence is "enfleshed" in all creation. Jesus' history, as is true for each of us, is webbed with Earth's. Of course, the divine presence in Jesus is complete; Jesus brought a "quantum leap" in consciousness and compassion. Yet the divine is present in all life. Nothing, including Jesus' life, can be separated from the rest of creation; it all manifests divinity.

"The incarnation begins . . . with the very first act of God . . . the first creative moment of our world. The incarnation is a process moving through the history of our created world . . . We are finding out more about the incarnation than ever before."

Kenan B. Osborne, OFM



"The divinity is so intimately present in the world that the world can be regarded as an incarnate expression of the Trinity, as creative, as expansive, as conscious, as self-realizing and self-sharing." Beatrice Bruteau.

"The energy of the earth in living plants and animals and human beings is unified by the Incarnate Word. Incarnation was not . . . an afterthought, but, rather, the ground and goal of the movement of the entire world process. " Albert. C. Fritsch, S. J.

God and the world are not identical (pantheism), but "the world is immanent with, and present to, God even as God is immanent within, and present to, the world." John Cobb

Sunlight helps banish dark moods (seasonal affective disorder). How might "basking" in the light of Jesus' life and lessons also brighten our moods?

The light of Jesus' teaching and example in the Gospels caused a transformation in Earth's evolution. "We can finally see straight, see what we are doing, where we are going, and really see the faces of those who are making the journey with us. . . We can also see now what should not be done to others, what should not happen to animals and the earth. . . ." Wendy Cotter, CSJ

God lives and acts in us as well as in our entire world. God's covenant with all creation (Genesis 9: 9-11) requires our active participation in caring for our sacred Earth. Pope Francis tells us in *Laudato Si'* that Christians "need an 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them" (par. 217) [because] "each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us" (par. 221)

Madeleine L'Engle has another insight on the meaning of incarnation: "To paint a picture or to write a story or to compose a song is an incarnational activity. The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth giver. In a very real sense the artist should be like Mary who, when the angel told her that she was to bear the messiah, was obedient to the command. . . ." How can your creativity extend the light of Christ?

III. Share your reaction to any of the readings from Week Two.

IV. Suggestions for this week:

Pray to recognize God's Light in yourself, in others, and in the rest of creation. Ponder the Gospels for how the light of Jesus' teaching and example can enlighten your life. Bring your candle/vigil next week.

V. Closing:

Use the Flame Meditation on pp. 7-8.

Flame Meditation

Sit reflectively in darkness for several minutes. Then someone light the center candle and each one's vigil.



Leader: A reflection on the Divine Dynamic, the relationship between humans, the Earth, and the creative power of the Universe.

Take turns reading:

All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life and the life was the life of all people. John 1: 3

Let the flame evoke the memory of the primordial creation event some billions of years ago, when out of a fertile nothingness a great fire billowed out in all directions. Our Universe was born then. God's Word was spoken there. The Divine Artist was at work there. It was an art show to surpass all art shows. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame with its heat evoke within us the memory of the intense heat of a star that exploded some several billion years ago, giving birth to our sun and from the scraps of that birth our beautiful blue-green Earth. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us a memory of Earth some four and a half billion years ago, when it was a lava-like fiery ball of molten rock in the sky that over time formed a crust upon which we stand today. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us the memory of the earliest humans, who sat around their own fires and gazed into their own flickering flames while their shadows danced behind them on the cave walls. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke with us the memory of that burning bush before which Moses stood, with his shoes off and his knees shaking, experiencing the Divine Dynamic calling him to the cutting edges of his life. You and I were being loved there.



Let the flame evoke within us the memory of those fires on the hillsides and lakesides of Galilee, around which the rabbi Jesus sat instructing his disciples. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us the memories of our ancestors who sat before their fireplaces, wood stoves, lanterns and candles while they dreamed great dreams for their children. You and I were being loved there.



Let the flame make us aware of the fire that burns deep within us, a fire that embraces us with all our successes and failures, hopes and fears, joys and anxieties, good moments and not so good ones. It is a divine love that invites us to move confidently and creatively into our preferred future, the future of our Earth and the future of our whole Universe.

adapted from John Surette, SJ

Quiet Reflection

Pray together:

... Empower me, Great God of Life,
to fully live each day.
To shape my share of radiant light with joyful care,
and tend the fires of your reflection everywhere.

from "Matins," Terri MacKenzie, SHCJ
(<http://ecospiritualityresources.com/media>)

Extinguish candles.

Share reactions.

Socialize.

Third Week of Advent: the Dark Side

Gaudete Sunday • Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 12 • St. Lucy, Dec. 13

I. Introduction

Share anything relevant from the past week. Note dates above. Light candles. Remember the presence of God whatever way assists the group to become recollected. Leader prays aloud to be attentive to the Spirit, for those present, and for all those using this resource in many countries. Read the Scripture:

The Lord is my Light and my Salvation. Ps. 27:1

We have seen a great light. Isaiah 9:1

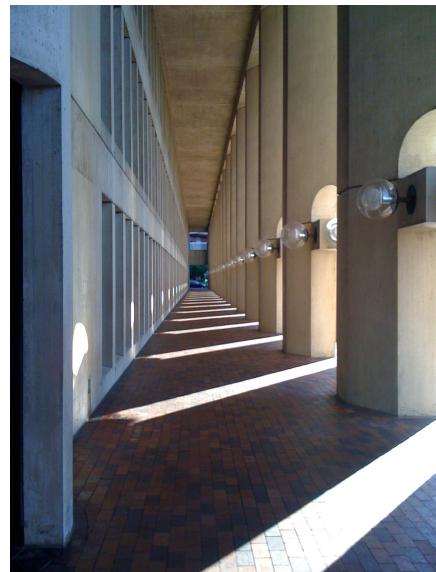
Silent reflection followed by sharing: When do people want light? Extinguish candles.

II. Input

What is the darkest dark you have experienced?

Darkness and light are complementary parts of creation. Life forms in the dark womb, most seeds grow in darkness, darkness facilitates sleep. Stars always shine, but we need darkness to see them. The Romans celebrated the coming of winter, when the sun's rays hit Earth obliquely in the Northern Hemisphere, on Dec. 25 (Julian Calendar). Think of aspects of our Christmas story that include the presence or absence of light.

Pope Francis on darkness: "... humility ...requires ... leaders to allow room for God, to be familiar with the interior experience of darkness, of not knowing what to do."



"Dark offers not only fear and cold, confusion and loss, but also the quiet, calling us to the depths of our lives where we find new truths and clarity and above all, our loving God." Margaret Hickey, ND

But, "If I pray for the light, I need to remember that light isn't sentimental. It illuminates the smiling infant and the wormy corpse, every broken promise and every act of faith." Sy Safransky

Carl Jung alerted us to positive and negative "shadow sides" within everyone. Somehow it seems easier to find dark shadows in others! What we dislike in others is sometimes a signal that the disliked aspects are in ourselves. "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. This procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not very popular." Carl Jung

Even organizations and countries have shadow sides. It is unpleasant to discover that qualities disliked in other countries and groups exist within our own groups and nation. It takes courage to face up to the gifts of the shadow and become increasingly enlightened. Surely this is the gift of the Light of Christ! Can you think of examples of group or national negative shadow sides, often denied? (What about personal examples?)

There is "real brokenness and darkness in human nature due to sin. Compulsive greed and chronic indifference are the two great obstacles to a healthy relationship with Creation." Keith D. Warner, OFM. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis lists current global problems and dares us "to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it." (par. 19)

The sun's ancient carbon (C) is stored in fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas) that is converted to carbon dioxide (CO₂) when burned. Starting with the Industrial Revolution, amounts of CO₂ have constantly risen. Excessive releasing of it by mining, manufacturing, transporting, and using fossil fuels harms all of creation (especially people living in poverty) by changing the balance of chemicals in our atmosphere. [Other factors also contribute to global warming.] Hydraulic fracturing of natural gas and mining tar sands threaten water as well as air and cause multiple problems. Even if spills, contamination of resources, political and noise pollution could be avoided, global warming is inevitably worsened by them. Don't let industry ads fool you!

Developing renewable energies provides new jobs, lessens climate change, lowers pollution, and prevents health problems that result from fossil fuel use. Transitioning to renewable energy sources — wind, sun, biomass — is now possible for individuals and groups. (In the U.S., search for Alternate Electrical Supply Services and your zip code.) Energy efficiency also reduces carbon emissions. For example, compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) and LEDs cost more initially (sticker price), but they last longer and use less energy. Thus their true cost is less than incandescent bulbs.

III. Share your reaction to any of the ideas in Week Three.

IV. Suggestions for this week:

Contact one legislator and ask what s/he is doing to support renewable and sustainable energy. Thank him/her for efforts. If desired, plan a simple party for next week's socializing. Bring your candle/vigil next week.

V. Closing

See a video about fracking (cf. page 2).

Socialize.

Fourth Week of Advent: Light Within

Winter Solstice, Dec. 21 Christmas Eve, Dec. 24 • Christmas Day, Dec. 25

I. Introduction

Share anything relevant from the past week. Note dates above. Light candles. Remember the presence of God whatever way assists the group to become recollected. Leader prays aloud to be attentive to the Spirit, for those present, and for all those using this resource in many countries. Read the Scripture:

Today a great light has come upon the Earth. Gospel Acclamation

The Light shines in the darkness. . . . John 1:5

You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine . . . Matthew 5: 14, 16



Silent reflection followed by sharing: Into what darkness do you especially hope the light of Christ will shine? Extinguish candles.

II. Input — Take a moment to reflect after each paragraph:

Gary Zukav: "The Light that flows through your system [and all living beings] is Universal Energy. It is the Light of the Universe. You [and every other creature] give Light form. What you feel, what you think, how you behave, what you value and how you live your life reflect the way you are shaping the Light that is flowing through you."

Hildegard of Bingen, Rhineland mystic, wrote about 900 years ago: "There is no creature that does not have a radiance, be it greenness or seed, blossom or beauty. It could not be creation without it. If God had not the power to thus empower, the light to thus enlighten, where, then, would all creation be?"

John Muir: "The sun does not shine on us, but in us."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ: "Throughout my whole life, during every minute of it, the world has been gradually lighting up and blazing before my eyes until it has come to surround me, entirely lit up from within." "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Thomas Merton: "At the center of our being is a point of . . . nothingness and of absolute poverty. [It] is the pure glory of God in us . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billion points of

light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely."

Rachel Naomi Remen, MD: "Every time anyone becomes more transparent to the light in them, they will restore the light in the world."

This holiday season, as we celebrate the light of Christ, let us be appropriately awed by the realization that his light is within us. Light — our light — is needed to clarify genuine dangers to our interconnected Earth; our actions are needed to protect our common home and all of its inhabitants. What we do to improve the conditions listed by Pope Francis in Chapter Two of *Laudato Si'* contributes positively to the good of Earth's integral ecology. How can we connect our actions with the Light of Christ?

III. Suggestions for this week

Let the Christmas lights on trees and homes remind you to be grateful for the Light of Christ. Watch for "L/light" references during Christmas and holiday Masses.

IV. Closing

Light the center candle. Pause quietly to remember various lights that influenced your life. If you care to, share with the group how light from a person, creation, hymn, or other gifts touched or enlightened your life. When all who wish to share have done so, close by silently reading, and then saying together, this prayer adapted from John O'Donohue:

Loving Source of all light, may our thoughts find their way into words which have the weight of shadow to hold the layers of truth. May we never place our trust in minds claimed by empty light, where one-sided certainties are driven by false desire. When we look into our hearts, may our eyes have the kindness and reverence of candlelight. May we always find the light of Christ living and acting in us and in our world. Amen.

Evaluation:

- Share very briefly what this four-week experience meant to you.
- Pause to remember anything from these weeks that you feel called to incorporate into your life.

Gratitude: Using any gesture that you are comfortable using, thank each participant for the light s/he shared during these weeks.

Socialize.