

# **Listening is Where Love Begins**



## **Small Group Faith Sharing Guide for Advent 2023**



## **The first duty of love is to listen.**

*Paul Tillich*

Recently Fr. Tom Reese S.J., a Jesuit priest and journalist, suggested that Pope Francis' first goal for the synod process is to overcome the toxic polarization that the church struggles with today. The church is filled with hot button topics that need to be addressed, but until we find a way to speak to each other in an open-hearted manner and listen intently to each other's views, very little can be accomplished. Meanwhile, the "good news" of the Gospel, which we hope to model to the world, is co-opted by wearisome quarrels and disputes.

Pope Francis wants the entire church to become a synodal church – a listening church. He reminds us that: *"Listening is much more than simply hearing. Hearing is about receiving information, while listening is about communication, and calls for closeness. Listening also means being able to share questions and doubts, to journey side-by-side, to banish all claims to absolute power and to put our abilities and gifts at the service of the common good."*

The best place to cultivate a listening church is in small faith communities. In small group settings: people in parishes, religious communities, faith-based work environments, coffee-shop meetups, and zoom gatherings, actively and prayerfully listen to one another. It is here that we take the "toxic" out of our spiritual conversations – here where we imitate what Tertullian quoted a Roman pagan as observing some 200 years or so after the crucifixion: *"See how these Christians love each other."*

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*Listen carefully, my daughter, my son, to my instructions  
and attend to them with the ear of your heart.*

*This is advice from one who loves you.*

*Welcome it and faithfully put it into practice.*

Prologue, The Rule of St. Benedict



## **Faith Sharing Guidelines**

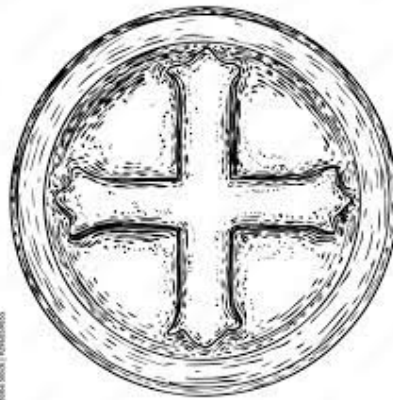
*Faith sharing is a unique kind of conversation. Reminding participants of these guidelines at the beginning of each meeting can be helpful.*

1. Please show up on time.
2. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
3. Everyone's input is valuable. At the same time, no one is required to speak.
4. Please only share on the level at which you are comfortable.
5. Please limit your sharing to a few minutes and wait until everyone has had the opportunity to share before you share again.
6. Only one person speaks at a time.
7. Please, no cross talking, which means no commenting on another person's share.  
"I" statements are better than "you" statements.
8. Please, no side conversations. Value one another by listening.
9. Please silence your cell phone and put it away. If you need to make a call or text, please take it outside or mute your speaker.
10. Periods of silent are natural and allow the Spirit to work. Resist the urge to fill in the silence unless you have something meaningful to say.

### **Opening Prayer for Meetings**

Lord, we ask you to accompany us in our faith sharing.  
We bless your presence in all of creation  
and open ourselves to your presence with us.

As we listen deeply to one another,  
may we learn to also listen deeply to the needs of our world.  
May our faith sharing bear fruit in our lives  
and in our outreach to others.  
We ask this in the name of Emmanuel, God with us. AMEN



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### **Closing Prayer for Meetings**

We thank you Lord for nurturing in each of us a disciple's heart.  
A heart that rejoices in this Advent preparation.  
A heart sustained by your Spirit.  
A heart encouraged by these fellow disciples.  
Help us be mediums of your grace. AMEN

# First Sunday of Advent

*Lord, Make Us Turn to You* Psalm 80:7

## **Reading 1:** IS 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7

You, LORD, are our father,  
our redeemer you are named forever.  
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,  
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?  
Return for the sake of your servants,  
the tribes of your heritage.  
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
with the mountains quaking before you,  
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,  
such as they had not heard of from of old.  
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you  
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.  
Would that you might meet us doing right,  
that we were mindful of you in our ways!  
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;  
all of us have become like unclean people,  
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;  
we have all withered like leaves,  
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.  
There is none who calls upon your name,  
who rouses himself to cling to you;  
for you have hidden your face from us  
and have delivered us up to our guilt.  
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;  
we are the clay and you the potter:  
we are all the work of your hands.

## **Reading II:** 1 COR 1:3-9

Brothers and sisters:  
Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
I give thanks to my God always on your account  
for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,  
that in him you were enriched in every way,

with all discourse and all knowledge,  
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you,  
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift  
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
He will keep you firm to the end,  
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
God is faithful,  
and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Gospel:** MK 13:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples:  
“Be watchful! Be alert!  
You do not know when the time will come.  
It is like a man traveling abroad.  
He leaves home and places his servants in charge,  
each with his own work,  
and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.  
Watch, therefore;  
you do not know when the lord of the house is coming,  
whether in the evening, or at midnight,  
or at cockcrow, or in the morning.  
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.  
What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’”

**Reflection One**

As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has or ever will have. Something inside that is unique to all time. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression...

Love and trust, in that space between what’s said and what’s heard in our life, can make all the different in the world. *Fred Rogers*

## Reflection Two: Love is Always the Way

It turns out that our happiness and contentment  
result directly from moving toward love,  
neighborliness,  
and generosity.

The way back to community and values  
passes through the neighborhood.

When we empty ourselves by giving to others  
we find ourselves mysteriously filled  
with peace  
and a sense of well-being.

This was central to the teaching of Jesus.

“In everything, do to others,” Jesus reminded us,  
“as you would have them do to you.  
for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

How would you like to be treated?  
It’s not that complicated.

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” he said. Bill Huebsch

*Encounter with the Holy, p.67*

## Sharing Questions: Blame

Blame is the act of holding yourself, another individual, or a group responsible for actions that you consider socially or morally wrong. Throughout the Old Testament, God and the prophets called on the Israelites to “turn back” to God. In the first reading the prophet turns the tables and blames God for turning away from the Israelites. The prophet laments, “Why do you let us wander, O Lord, from your ways.” God is blamed for allowing the people to “harden our hearts so that we fear you not” God is blamed for “[hiding] your face from us and [delivering] us up to our guilt.”

1. Have you ever blamed God for something? How about your parents, partner, friend, co-worker, bishop, government, etc. What were your core feelings at the center of that blame?
2. How does blame affect your ability to listen to the other (person, or institution)?
3. The second reflection states that our happiness and contentment result directly from moving toward love, neighborliness, and generosity. How might you “move toward love” this Advent season?
4. What other thoughts have you found in these scripture readings and reflections that can be applied to your life?



# Second Sunday of Advent

*Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem Is 40:2*

**Reading I:** *Is 40:1-5, 9-11*

Comfort, give comfort to my people,  
says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her  
that her service is at an end,  
her guilt is expiated;  
indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD  
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!  
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!  
Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill shall be made low;  
the rugged land shall be made a plain,  
the rough country, a broad valley.  
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Go up on to a high mountain,  
Zion, herald of glad tidings;  
cry out at the top of your voice,  
Jerusalem, herald of good news!  
Fear not to cry out

and say to the cities of Judah:  
Here is your God!

Here comes with power  
the Lord GOD,  
who rules by his strong arm;  
here is his reward with him,  
his recompense before him.

Like a shepherd he feeds his flock;  
in his arms he gathers the lambs,  
carrying them in his bosom,  
and leading the ewes with care.

**Reading 2: 2 PT 3:8-14**

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved,  
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years  
and a thousand years like one day.  
The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,”  
but he is patient with you,  
not wishing that any should perish  
but that all should come to repentance.  
But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,  
and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar  
and the elements will be dissolved by fire,  
and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.  
Since everything is to be dissolved in this way,  
what sort of persons ought you to be,  
conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion,  
waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,  
because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames  
and the elements melted by fire.  
But according to his promise  
we await new heavens and a new earth  
in which righteousness dwells.  
Therefore, beloved, since you await these things,  
be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace

**Gospel: МК 1:1-8**

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.  
As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:  
Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;  
he will prepare your way.  
A voice of one crying out in the desert:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight his paths.”  
John the Baptist appeared in the desert  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.  
People of the whole Judean countryside  
and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem  
were going out to him  
and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River  
as they acknowledged their sins.  
John was clothed in camel’s hair,  
with a leather belt around his waist.  
He fed on locusts and wild honey.  
And this is what he proclaimed:

“One mightier than I is coming after me.  
I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.  
I have baptized you with water;  
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

## Reflection One

There are three ways to ultimate success. The first way is to be kind.  
The second way is to be kind. The third way is to be kind. *Fred Rogers*

## Reflection Two

When we reflect on our lives and earthly home  
and its remarkable evolution,  
we have the sense that *Holy Mystery*  
the founder of it all,  
*dwells within us*  
as within all creation.

And it's *Gracious* because it's offered to us  
as a free gift from *Holy Mystery*,  
a gift we can scarcely comprehend  
but which shapes us  
and unites us.

We seem to have an inborn orientation  
Toward this *Holy and Gracious Mystery*.

As Karl Rahner put it, this *Mystery*, is always present  
in the background of our lives  
just as it is in the background of the universe.

We cannot disregard it even if we deny its presence,  
because it's part and parcel of our humanness.

We cannot easily separate ourselves, it seems,  
from the *Mystery* of which we're made.

Bill Huebsch

*Encounter with the Holy*, p.16

## Faith Sharing Questions: In God's Good Time

In reading one, Isaiah is waiting for God's good time. Jerusalem has been leveled. The address to Jerusalem is not to the city but to the people themselves who are distraught, wearied, exiled, and fragile. Isaiah asks God to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem," comparing God to a shepherd carrying his lambs in his bosom. Reading two reminds us that our sense of time is not God's sense of time, which calls for patience. Both Isaiah and John the Baptist in the gospel, point us towards what is to come in God's good time, while Karl Rahner, in reflection two, reminds us that this *Mystery* (God) is always present in the background of our lives just as it is in the background of the universe.

1. Anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics) is a literary technique used in relation to God throughout the Bible. Having to wait for "God's good time" can conjure an image of a capricious God who chooses to comfort, chastise, intercede, or punish humanity willy nilly. How does the idea of "in God's good time" apply to your image of God?
2. Reading two suggests that God has promised "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." Do you believe that the Catholic Church is capable of coming closer to this hopeful vision?
3. Waiting is so often an anxious endeavor. Is there something in your life that is keeping you waiting? How does that feel?
4. What other thoughts have you found in these scripture readings and reflections that can be applied to your life?

# Third Sunday of Advent

*The Spirit of the Lord in Upon Me* Is 61:1

## **Reading 1:** IS 61:1-2A, 10-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to heal the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and release to the prisoners,  
to announce a year of favor from the LORD  
and a day of vindication by our God.  
I rejoice heartily in the LORD,  
in my God is the joy of my soul;  
for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation  
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,  
like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem,  
like a bride bedecked with her jewels.  
As the earth brings forth its plants,  
and a garden makes its growth spring up,  
so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise  
spring up before all the nations.

## **Reading 2:** 1 THES 5:16-24

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.  
In all circumstances give thanks,  
for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.  
Do not quench the Spirit.  
Do not despise prophetic utterances.  
Test everything; retain what is good.  
Refrain from every kind of evil.  
May the God of peace make you perfectly holy  
and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,  
be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
The one who calls you is faithful,  
and he will also accomplish it.

**Gospel:** JN 1:6-8, 19-28

A man named John was sent from God.  
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
but came to testify to the light.  
And this is the testimony of John.  
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests  
and Levites to him  
to ask him, "Who are you?"  
He admitted and did not deny it,  
but admitted, "I am not the Christ."  
So they asked him,  
"What are you then? Are you Elijah?"  
And he said, "I am not."  
"Are you the Prophet?"  
He answered, "No."  
So they said to him,  
"Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?  
What do you have to say for yourself?"  
He said:  
"I am the voice of one crying out in the desert,  
'make straight the way of the Lord,'"  
as Isaiah the prophet said."  
Some Pharisees were also sent.  
They asked him,  
"Why then do you baptize  
if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?"  
John answered them,  
"I baptize with water;  
but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,  
the one who is coming after me,  
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."  
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,  
where John was baptizing.

## Reflection One:

Try your best to make goodness attractive.

That's one of the toughest assignments you'll ever be given. *Fred Rogers*

Image what our real neighbors would be like if each of us offered,

as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person. *Fred Rogers*

## Reflection Two: Where the Holy Lives

Jesus' message isn't about freedom or liberation  
in some glorious "after life."

*Heaven is made on earth*, dear friend.

If we don't find the sacred presence here,  
we won't find it in some heaven  
out in the skies.

The indwelling Holy One is within us now.

We're living in eternity  
which has neither an end nor a beginning.

If you're wondering what eternal life will be like,  
look around you:

you're already in your eternal life  
and what you make of it will last forever.

Again, it isn't that the Holy is inviting us  
into the so-called "next world"  
but that the holy presence is already here,  
in "this world" to stay.

The incarnation hasn't ended but continues today.

the Holy has done the unthinkable  
and come to us,  
dwelling in this world because *it is holy*.

Hence, to live in secular holiness  
is to embrace the call to self-giving  
which sounds in our lives every day.

And even though we see ourselves as secular,  
we are still invited every day  
to encounter the Holy.

Bill Huebsch

*Encounter with the Holy*, pp. 145-146

## Sharing Questions: Indwelling

In the first reading the prophet proclaims that the spirit of the Lord God is upon him because the Lord has anointed him. The anointing recalls the anointing of David, where God's spirit rushed upon David immediately after being anointed by Samuel. In the second reflection Bill Huebsch writes that "the indwelling Holy One is within us now," and reading two warns us not to "quench the Spirit."

1. How do you listen to the indwelling Spirit of God?
2. In the first reflection, Fred Rogers says, "Try your best to make goodness attractive. That's one of the toughest assignments you'll ever be given." Why is it that goodness is not always considered attractive or desirable? Do you find it difficult to "testify to the light," as it says in the gospel?
3. One of the most common translations of the Hindu word, *namaste*, is "The divine light in me bows to the divine light within you." Think of someone who antagonizes you. Do you think bowing (figuratively) to the divine light in that person could improve your relationship/communication? What would change in you?
4. What other thoughts have you found in these scripture readings and reflections that can be applied to your life?



# Fourth Sunday of Advent

*I have been with you wherever you went. 2 Samuel 7:9*

**Reading 1:** 2 SM 7:1-5, 8B-12, 14A, 16

When King David was settled in his palace,  
and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side,  
he said to Nathan the prophet,  
“Here I am living in a house of cedar,  
while the ark of God dwells in a tent!”  
Nathan answered the king,  
“Go, do whatever you have in mind,  
for the LORD is with you.”  
But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said:  
“Go, tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD:  
Should you build me a house to dwell in?’”  
“It was I who took you from the pasture  
and from the care of the flock  
to be commander of my people Israel.  
I have been with you wherever you went,  
and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.  
And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth.  
I will fix a place for my people Israel;  
I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place  
without further disturbance.  
Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old,  
since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel.  
I will give you rest from all your enemies.  
The LORD also reveals to you  
that he will establish a house for you.  
And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors,  
I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins,  
and I will make his kingdom firm.  
I will be a father to him,  
and he shall be a son to me.  
Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;  
your throne shall stand firm forever.”

## **Reading 2: ROM 16:25-27**

Brothers and sisters:

To him who can strengthen you,  
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,  
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages  
but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,  
according to the command of the eternal God,  
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,  
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ  
be glory forever and ever. Amen.

## **Gospel: LK 1:26-38**

The angel Gabriel was sent from God  
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,  
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,  
of the house of David,  
and the virgin's name was Mary.  
And coming to her, he said,  
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."  
But she was greatly troubled at what was said  
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.  
Then the angel said to her,  
"Do not be afraid, Mary,  
for you have found favor with God.  
"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,  
and you shall name him Jesus.  
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,  
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,  
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,  
and of his kingdom there will be no end."  
But Mary said to the angel,  
"How can this be,  
since I have no relations with a man?"  
And the angel said to her in reply,  
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.  
Therefore the child to be born  
will be called holy, the Son of God.  
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,  
has also conceived a son in her old age,  
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;  
for nothing will be impossible for God."  
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.  
May it be done to me according to your word."  
Then the angel departed from her.

## Reflection One

Love is like infinity: You can't have more or less infinity, and you can't compare two things to see if they're 'equally infinite.' Infinity just is, and that's the way I think love is too."

Fred Rogers

## Reflection Two: Gloria

We acclaim together that you, O Holy One,  
bring peace on earth  
among people of good will.

We stand in awe of divine love.

We marvel at divine goodness  
and all that the Holy has given us.

We acclaim the Holy One as our only hope,  
our eternal source of love,  
and our intimate divine companion.

With divine mercy,  
you give us the grace to love  
and to do good and avoid evil.

With divine mercy,  
you fulfill the desires of our hearts  
and sustain us in grace.

With divine mercy,  
you draw us closer to yourself  
and give us all we need.

For you are indeed the Source of Love,  
the Servant of All,  
and the Light of the World,

Jesus Christ,  
the Spirit of Holy Wisdom  
and the Author of our very being. Amen

Bill Huebsch

*Encounter with the Holy*, p. 90-91

## Sharing Questions: Revelation and Mystery

Paul Tillich, a Lutheran philosopher and theologian, once defined real religion as something we achieve when we accept a reality and consciousness beyond our own, as opposed to settling for the highest ideals humanity can offer. In real religion we meet God, not ourselves.

Revelation and mystery are where we meet God. Revelation does not only happen to saints or 'holy people'. We are all responsible for listening to God's word in order to see how God is revealing God's self to us.

1. Divine Revelation is not always what we might expect it to be. Two revelations happen in these readings that knock both recipients off guard. In the first reading God lets David know (through a dream of Nathan's) that God is affronted that David would suggest building a house in which God might dwell. In the gospel we find Mary "very troubled" by a visiting angel and initially very bewildered by God's request of her. Think of a time in your life when you came to a crossroads and your destination was not clear. How did you handle it spiritually?
2. The title of this Advent booklet is "Listening is Where Love Begins." In reflection two, Fred Rogers compares love to infinity. How do you relate to those ideas of love? How would you describe love yourself?
3. Christianity is full of revelation and mystery. Our hearts can know things that our minds cannot picture, and our experience of faith can be full of a richness for which we will never find adequate words. Do the mysteries and revelations of the faith draw you closer to God, or are some of them problematic for you?
4. How has experiencing these four weeks of Advent faith sharing prepared you for Christmas?

*Arise,  
Shine,  
for your light has come!*



*May the grace and peace of Emmanuel,  
God With Us,  
Bless your Christmas and New Year*





