

Climb the mountain.

Hope, even in the face of loss.

Study the prophets.

That's the 3-part plan for Advent,
the plan to become a person ready for the Incarnation, for Christmas,
the plan to live in expectation of Christ's coming, & his second coming.

Climb. Hope. Study.

Climb the mountains of division that separate us,
the mountains of class, race, suspicion, and disgust,
but also the mountains of betrayal and envy
that separate individuals, that keep neighbor from neighbor,
wife from husband, and father from son.

Hope. Cling tightly to the promise God makes every day,
that his mercies are never-ending,
that each day brings new possibilities,
that even when we suffer a terrible loss a tiny green shoot
of resurrection grows out of the dead stump of the cross.

And study the example of the prophets.

Follow the example of the men and women who trusted in God
and found a way when it seemed there was no way.

Let their words be on your lips:

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

“Beat swords into ploughshares...”

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...”

Climb. Hope. Study. Do these three things to be faithful & wise,
to be an example to the rest of us, to be ready for Jesus.



But today, on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent,
learn what to do after you've done everything right and it isn't enough.

Today the fourth, final, and most important step
in preparing yourself for the coming of Christ: Give up.
Admit you aren't good enough or faithful enough... and give up.



“Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by YOUR daily visitation,
that Christ may find us prepared for his arrival.”

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, because we can't purify it ourselves,
no matter how high we climb, how fervently we hope,
or how much we study.

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, because you are the only one who can.



Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way.

Joseph was a good & faithful man, ready to start a family with Mary.

But then Mary was pregnant. It seemed she had betrayed his trust.

Joseph - good, faithful Joseph - responded to Mary with kindness.

Maybe it doesn't read that way today because of
the culture difference, but it was.

What else could Joseph think but that she had lied to him?

What would you have done?

Nobody would have blinked if he had publicly shamed her,
if he had canceled her, to use the cliché, but he didn't.
He was going to end the engagement,
but quietly, to spare her any public disgrace.

Joseph climbed over the mountain of anger he felt.
He held onto the hope that he could build a different life,
and he followed the example of the prophets,
both in upholding moral standards and in showing
mercy & forgiveness to the woman he thought had betrayed him.

Joseph did everything right,
and God sent an angel to tell him he was doing everything wrong.
God sent an angel to purify his conscience.



I love that story right now because there are 8 billion people in the world
and it's too much for us to figure out on our own.
It's just too complicated.

I don't know why but I was thinking this week
about those Delta pilots who lost their pensions.
What was it, 15 years ago?

They had done everything right. Worked hard, studied, sacrificed,
become successful, and set themselves and their families up
for financial security. And then it all got taken away.

It all went away, because sometimes you do everything right
and the world makes it come out wrong.

The real place you see it is in families.

I was listening to another priest talk about what he called,
“the humbling adventure of raising children.”

Some parents do almost everything right and then watch in horror
as a mountain of division grows between them and their child,
as resentment and pain pushes them farther away.

Some couples do almost everything right, but they weren't prepared
for the curveball they couldn't imagine, and they fall into despair.
They loved and sacrificed and nobody broke any rules
but they lost it. They lost the vision of a life together.

Or a woman loses her faith. She was raised in it. Lived it.
But despite all her efforts she lost it. She lost her faith.



This last lesson of Advent is admitting the limits of our ability
to please God through trying hard,
is giving up the fantasy that we can find the answers we need
in a world that often makes no sense,
and learning instead to ask God every single day
to purify our conscience. To guide our intuition.
To give us new and contrite hearts.



Surrendering to God is not like surrendering to chance,
because we surrender control to an all-loving, all-knowing God
and we ask him to purify our conscience,
to purify our UNCONSCIOUS,
to purify decisions that we can't justify,
that we can't defend,
to guide those decisions we make
when the limits of reason have been exhausted.

Like a Good Samaritan helping a man on the side of the road.
Like a loving father welcoming home a prodigal son.
Like a good man listening to an angel who says,
“Don't dismiss her. Don't run away. Go closer. Protect my son.”



Joseph knew what he wanted from life,
and he did all the right things to make that good, faithful life happen.
But that wasn't the life he got.

And when this strange life arrived,
his morality and his effort were not sufficient to the moment he faced.

But God spoke to him, purified his conscience,
gave him the courage to embrace a future radically different
from the one he had wanted and had sacrificed to achieve.



The most important thing you can do this Advent

is ask God to do what you cannot do for yourself:

to purify your conscience, to take away the heart of stone
that forms in your chest when all your hard work has failed,
and to give you a heart of flesh.

Ask God each morning to purify your conscience

so that when you reach the limits of knowledge,

when you reach the limits of effort,

you can follow the advice of your heart,

a heart that has been made clean

by the daily visitation of our loving and Almighty God.

Amen.