

## Advent Poetry Companion: Poems for Prayer and Pondering

*“Prepare in the  
wilderness a  
highway for our  
God.”*

*—Isaiah 40:—*



### How to pray with poetry

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Using poetry as a companion for prayer can be a rich and engaging endeavor. Poetry as an art form uses the cadences of the spoken word, the nuances of language, the signals of punctuation and the employment of metaphors to invite the listener into participation in the unfolding of layers of meaning. Words can provide a bridge to experiences that are beyond words.

This Advent, we have prepared an Advent Poetry Companion which offers an additional resource for your Advent journey. This companion provides poems that can enrich and deepen the meaning of this liturgical season.

The prayers and liturgical readings of the Advent season are rich in meaning, symbolism, and prophetic themes. Poetry provides a beautiful way to explore and express these themes and probe more deeply the mystery of the incarnation.

Below are some simple suggestions for engaging poetry as a means of leading you into prayer:

1. Seek a quiet space where you can minimize interruptions and take a few moments to enter into the silence. Let yourself sink deeply into the quiet. Invite God in.
2. Read just the title of the poem and ponder what this encounter might be about.
3. Read the poem aloud. Pay attention to the words, the sounds, the punctuation and what you are hearing in the poem.
4. Now read the poem silently and slowly letting the poem reveal new truths. As you listen again notice which words or phrases catch your attention. Underline them.
5. Journal your thoughts or impressions:
  - What new ways of seeing or hearing are opening for you in this poem?
  - What truth do you hear in the poem that intersects with the unfolding of your life?
  - What parts of the poem call you to be present or to see in an entirely different way?
  - How does this poem reflect or resonate with your own experience? What insights does it spark?
6. Reread the poem once more out loud. Let the poem filter through you.
7. Compose your own short prayer as a response.



# ADVENT POETRY COMPANION

## Recommended Poetry Resources:

The following resources will provide worthy companions on your Advent journey. Many of the resources below focus on the use of poetry as a tool for prayer and reflection. The resources listed below can be found in your local bookstore or ordered online through <http://www.amazon.com>.

### *Book Recommendations:*

This "Poetry as Prayer" book series is published by Pauline Books and Media. Each book provides wonderful tools for engaging the various poets for prayer and reflection.

- Poetry as Prayer: Denise Levertov*, by Murray Bodo, O.F.M. (2001).
- Poetry as Prayer: Jessica Powers*, by Bishop Robert F. Morneau (2000).
- Poetry as Prayer: The Hound of Heaven*, by Robert Waldron (1999).
- Poetry as Prayer: St. Francis of Assisi*, by Murray Bobo, OFM. (2003)
- Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton*, by Robert G. Waldron. (2000)
- Poetry as Prayer: Gerard Manley Hopkins*, by Maria Lichtmann. (2002)
- Poetry as Prayer: The Psalms*, by M. Basil Pennington. (2001)
- Poetry as Prayer: Emily Dickenson*, by John Delli-Carpini. (2002)



*Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2004. This is a wonderful companion for Advent and contains readings from various authors including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Donne, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, C.S. Lewis, Henri Nouwen and many others.

*Fathoming Bethlehem: Advent Meditations*, by Robert F. Morneau, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997. Bishop Morneau has a gift for opening up poetry for prayer. In this book, Morneau begins each day with the gospel reading followed by a brief commentary along with a poem for each day.

*Upholding Mystery: An Anthology of Contemporary Christian Poetry*, edited by David Impastato (Oxford University Press, 1997). Poems by 15 important English-language poets, organized by meditative subjects such as transformation, injustice, the Holy.

*Divine Inspiration: The Life of Jesus in World Poetry*, edited by Robert Atwan, George Dardess and Peggy Rosenthal (Oxford University Press, 1998). Poems reflecting on particular Gospel passages, drawn from contemporary world cultures as well as major poets of the past 2,000 years.

***"I searched  
God's lexicon  
to fathom "Bethlehem"  
and "Calvary."  
It simply said:  
See "Love."***

***-Gordon Gilsdorf***



## Annunciation

by Denise Levertov

'Hail, space for the uncontained God'  
From the Agathistos Hymn, Greece, VIC

We know the scene: the room, variously  
furnished,  
almost always a lectern, a book; always  
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of  
great wings,  
the angelic ambassador, standing or  
hovering,  
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one  
mentions  
courage.

The engendering Spirit  
did not enter her without consent.  
God waited.

She was free  
to accept or to refuse, choice  
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations  
of one sort or another  
in most lives?

Some unwillingly  
undertake great destinies,  
enact them in sullen pride,  
uncomprehending.

More often  
those moments  
when roads of light and storm  
open from darkness in a man or woman,  
are turned away from  
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair  
and with relief.  
Ordinary lives continue.

God does not smite them.  
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.



**The Annunciation**  
by Henry Tanner, Philadelphia Museum of Art

She had been a child who played, ate, slept  
like any other child – but unlike others,  
wept only for pity, laughed  
in joy not triumph.  
Compassion and intelligence  
fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous  
than any in all of Time,  
she did not quail,  
only asked  
a simple, 'How can this be?'  
and gravely, courteously,  
took to heart the angel's reply,  
perceiving instantly  
the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb  
Infinite weight and lightness; to carry  
in hidden, finite inwardness,  
nine months of Eternity; to contain  
in slender vase of being,  
the sum of power –  
in narrow flesh,  
the sum of light.

Then bring to birth,  
push out into air, a Man-child  
needing, like any other,  
milk and love –

but who was God.

This was the minute no one speaks of,  
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,  
Spirit,  
suspended,  
waiting.

She did not cry, "I cannot, I am not worthy,"  
nor "I have not the strength."  
She did not submit with gritted teeth,  
raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,  
consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,  
the lily glowed in it,  
and the iridescent wings.

Consent,  
courage unparalleled,  
opened her utterly.

*Source: "Annunciation" from The Stream and the Sapphire, by Denise Levertov. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1997.*

## The Angel and The Girl Are Met

by Edwin Muir

The angel and the girl are met  
Earth was the only meeting place.  
For the embodied never yet  
Travelled beyond the shore of space.  
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

See, they have come together, see,  
While the destroying minutes flow,  
Each reflects the other's face  
Till heaven in hers and earth in his  
Shine steady there. He's come to her  
From far beyond the farthest star,  
Feathered through time. Immediacy  
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss  
That from their limbs all movement takes.  
Yet the increasing rapture brings  
So great a wonder that it makes  
Each feather tremble on his wings

Outside the window footsteps fall  
Into the ordinary day  
And with the sun along the wall  
Pursue their unreturning way  
Sound's perpetual roundabout  
Rolls its numbered octaves out  
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune

But through the endless afternoon  
These neither speak nor movement make.  
But stare into their deepening trance  
As if their grace would never break.

Source: *Collected Poems*, by Edwin Muir. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.



## Advent

by Stephen Leake

Somewhere your star-struck choir sings  
As the evening unpeels our histories.  
The world is here again!

I feel the breathing of yuletide fires,  
The ribboned refrains of seasoned candles  
And bars of voices beyond St. Stephen's Wall.

The robin appears in a globe of joy  
His carol negotiating wreaths of cloud  
And tinsled cakes of snow.

We wing into the holy day  
While the blinking eye of the gifting moon  
Receives you at that vanishing point

On memory's path:  
Outlived by love  
Alone.

Source: <http://www.christmas-time.com/adventleake.htm>

## Journaling:

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## The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe

by Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.

WILD air, world-mothering air,  
Nestling me everywhere,  
That each eyelash or hair  
Girdles; goes home betwixt  
The fleeciest, frailest-fixed  
Snowflake; that 's fairly mixed  
With, riddles, and is rife  
In every least thing's life;  
This needful, never spent,  
And nursing element;  
My more than meat and drink,  
My meal at every wink;  
This air, which, by life's law,  
My lung must draw and draw  
Now but to breathe its praise,  
Minds me in many ways  
Of her who not only  
Gave God's infinity  
Dwindled to infancy  
Welcome in womb and breast,  
Birth, milk, and all the rest  
But mothers each new grace  
That does now reach our race—  
Mary Immaculate,  
Merely a woman, yet  
Whose presence, power is  
Great as no goddess's  
Was deemèd, dreamèd; who  
This one work has to do—  
Let all God's glory through,  
God's glory which would go  
Through her and from her flow  
Off, and no way but so.

I say that we are wound  
With mercy round and round  
As if with air: the same  
Is Mary, more by name.  
She, wild web, wondrous robe,  
Mantles the guilty globe,  
Since God has let dispense  
Her prayers his providence:  
Nay, more than almoner,  
The sweet alms' self is her  
And men are meant to share  
Her life as life does air.

Source: *Poems*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins.  
London: Oxford University Press, 1956.



If I have understood,  
She holds high motherhood  
Towards all our ghostly good  
And plays in grace her part  
About man's beating heart,  
Laying, like air's fine flood,  
The deathdance in his blood;  
Yet no part but what will  
Be Christ our Saviour still.  
Of her flesh he took flesh:  
He does take fresh and fresh,  
Though much the mystery how,  
Not flesh but spirit now  
And makes, O marvellous!  
New Nazareths in us,  
Where she shall yet conceive  
Him, morning, noon, and eve;  
New Bethlems, and he born  
There, evening, noon, and morn—  
Bethlem or Nazareth,  
Men here may draw like breath  
More Christ and baffle death;  
Who, born so, comes to be  
New self and nobler me  
In each one and each one  
More makes, when all is done,  
Both God's and Mary's Son.

Again, look overhead  
How air is azurèd;  
O how! nay do but stand  
Where you can lift your hand  
Skywards: rich, rich it laps  
Round the four fingergaps.  
Yet such a sapphire-shot,  
Charged, steepèd sky will not  
Stain light. Yea, mark you this:  
It does no prejudice.  
The glass-blue days are those  
When every colour glows,  
Each shape and shadow shows.  
Blue be it: this blue heaven  
The seven or seven times seven

*"How depict the invisible? How  
picture the inconceivable? How  
give expression to the limitless, the  
immeasurable, the invisible?"*

*-St. John of Damascus*

Hued sunbeam will transmit  
Perfect, not alter it.  
Or if there does some soft,  
On things aloof, aloft,  
Bloom breathe, that one breath more  
Earth is the fairer for.  
Whereas did air not make  
This bath of blue and slake  
His fire, the sun would shake,  
A blear and blinding ball  
With blackness bound, and all  
The thick stars round him roll  
Flashing like flecks of coal,  
Quartz-fret, or sparks of salt,  
In grimy vasty vault.

So God was god of old:  
A mother came to mould  
Those limbs like ours which are  
What must make our daystar  
Much dearer to mankind;  
Whose glory bare would blind  
Or less would win man's mind.  
Through her we may see him  
Made sweeter, not made dim,  
And her hand leaves his light  
Sifted to suit our sight.

Be thou then, O thou dear  
Mother, my atmosphere;  
My happier world, wherein  
To wend and meet no sin;  
Above me, round me lie  
Fronting my froward eye  
With sweet and scarless sky;  
Stir in my ears, speak there  
Of God's love, O live air,  
Of patience, penance, prayer:  
World-mothering air, air wild,  
Wound with thee, in thee isled,  
Fold home, fast fold thy child.



## Expectans Expectavi

by Anne Ridler

The candid freezing season again:  
Candle and cracker, needles of fir and frost;  
Carols that through the night air pass, piercing  
The glassy husk of heart and heaven;  
Children's faces white in the pane, bright in the tree-light.

And the waiting season again,  
That begs a crust and suffers joy vicariously:  
In bodily starvation now, in the spirit's exile always.  
O might the hilarious reign of love begin, let in  
Like carols from the cold  
The lost who crowd the pane, numb outcasts into welcome.

Source: Collected Poems, Anne Ridler. Manchester: Carcanet, 1997.

### Journaling:

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## The Minor Prophets

by Michael Lind

None of the minor prophets  
knew that he was minor, of course. Habakkuk, I imagine,  
thought that his visions earned him  
standing as Ezekiel's peer, if not indeed Elijah's.  
Then there was Obadiah,  
who could be forgiven if he thought he might be a Moses.  
How they would be remembered  
Providence concealed from them all, though they could see the future.

Maybe it doesn't matter.  
If you're on a mission from God, sent to rebuke a city  
or to redeem a nation,  
where by cannon-makers you're ranked may be inconsequential.  
Nor is the voice within you  
any less authentic for not having a distant echo.  
Seers of the world, be heartened.  
Even minor prophets can have genuine revelations.

Source: *Parallel Lives*, Michael Lind. Wilkes-Barre, PA: Etruscan Press, 2007.

### Journaling:

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# ADVENT POETRY COMPANION

## Advent

By Daniel Berrigan

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss --  
This is true: For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,  
that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction --  
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever --  
This is true: For unto us a child is born, and unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world --  
This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo, I am with you, even unto the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church, before we can be peacemakers.  
This is true: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young shall see visions, and your old shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for the liberation of humanity, for justice, human dignity, and peace are not meant for this earth and for this history --  
This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope.  
Let us see visions of love and peace and justice.

Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage:  
Jesus Christ -- the Life of the world.

Source: *Testimony: The Word Made Fresh*, by Daniel Berrigan. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

*"Come to us, Lord, and bring us peace.  
We will rejoice in your presence and serve  
you with all our heart."*

*-Isaiah -8-*



### Journaling:

Journaling lines consisting of 15 horizontal lines for writing.





# ADVENT POETRY COMPANION

## The Second Coming

by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand:  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Source: *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, W.B. Yeats. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

### Journaling:

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## May Christmas Come

by Alan Jones

The rough beast slouching  
toward Bethlehem,  
still waits to come to term.  
Christmas comes and goes  
as we expect.  
Nothing changes.

This year in New York, Jerusalem  
and Kabul,  
the Innocents are slaughtered  
according to Herod's schedule.  
His rage, unchecked,  
still does its work.

Yet this year  
things could be different.  
September 11th adds urgency  
to the  
birth,  
making this the time of choosing.

The choice is ours  
to miss the point or  
see Mary and her child  
in every mother and her baby,  
and adore, absorbing  
the rage and terror  
and with a loving heart  
rebuild the world,  
making peace our gift.

May Christmas come.

Source: <http://www.thewitness.org/agw/jones.121901.html> (11/5/07).



# ADVENT POETRY COMPANION

*"I am the Lord, your God,  
who grasp your right hand;  
It is I who say to you,  
"Fear not,  
I will help you."*

*-Isaiah 41:1-*



## Presence

by Stephen Leake

Across the dark, a robin learns the Winter.  
A candle dissolves; frank and sensuous  
Against the extending light.  
The streets remain illegible with snow.

I travel through you; uncurling  
Where weather decorates the night  
And naves of Christmas pines  
Grasp human shadows.

Alone I go, echoing carols  
In powdered places. Echoes that are glorified.  
Prolonged.

Until I find you on the bench  
Pressed with our pasts.  
A child again. Tricked and traced by  
Memory's gift. Lasting. Imprinted.

A proof of the year's new world.

Source: <http://www.christmas-time.com/presence.htm>

## Journaling:

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# ADVENT POETRY COMPANION

## Birthing

By Mark Unbehagen

How does one birth peace. . .  
in a world that seems to prefer the profits of war?

How can one birth hope. . .  
in a time when devastation is born of poverty and pandemic?

How does one birth love. . .  
in a world whose heart is captive to fear?

How can one birth joy. . .  
How can one birth joy?

The plastic manger scene on the front lawn  
just doesn't do it!

Birthing is so much more!

It is, and requires. . .  
radical intimacy,  
prolonged patience,  
the coming together of pain and ecstasy,  
the joining of our deepest hopes and fears.

Face it,  
birthing is a messy business.

And yet this process occurs every moment of our lives:  
as our bodies birth cell upon cell,  
as our minds birth ideas and dreams into the world,  
as our spirits birth. . .

in the midst of labor and pain. . .

as our spirits birth.. JOY!



### Journaling:

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*“And the Word became flesh and  
made his dwelling among us,  
and we saw his glory,  
the glory as of God’s only Son,  
full of grace and truth.”*

*-John 1: 14*

## A Story of Some Truly Wise Men

By Christine Rodgers

These three  
rulers

restless  
in their own hearts

pacing  
within  
the narrow  
parameters  
of their kingdoms,

saw  
simultaneously  
the mighty  
unblinking  
star  
that would  
lead them  
all  
to their greatest challenge.

They hurried  
then --  
from each

of their sovereign corners,  
and found themselves  
together  
in the doorway  
of a stable

gazing upon  
an infant  
only a few days old

as they bent  
in adoration  
with those already gathered.  
There was no other choice -  
the majesty  
of the world  
was before them.

Source: <http://www.greatgreenheart.com/>

*"The Lord is just; he will award the crown of  
justice to all who have longed for his coming."*

*- 2 Timothy 4:8*

### Journaling:

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## The Journey of the Magi

by T.S. Elliot

A cold coming we had of it,  
 Just the worst time of the year  
 For the journey, and such a long journey:  
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
 The very dead of winter.'  
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
 Lying down in the melting snow.  
 There were times we regretted  
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
 A hard time we had of it.  
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
 Sleeping in snatches,  
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
 That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
 With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,  
 And three trees on the low sky,  
 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
 And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,  
 But there was no information, and so we continued  
 And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
 Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
 And I would do it again, but set down  
 This set down  
 This: were we led all that way for  
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
 With an alien people clutching their gods.  
 I should be glad of another death.

Source: Collected Poems 1909-1962, T.S. Elliot. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1974.

*"The Magi were overjoyed at seeing the star,  
 and on entering the house they saw the child  
 with Mary his mother. they prostrated  
 themselves and did him homage."*

*-Matthew 2: 10-11*



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