

# Pray That You Have Strength

## SUNDAY

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### *Step 1. Welcome the Silence*

*Settle into your prayer space and sit in silence for a minute or two.*

### *Step 2. Discover Your Story within the Word*

*As you make the Sign of the Cross, pray:*

+ O God, unshelter my heart that I may hear and know your holy Word.

*Read the Sunday gospel passage.*

Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

**Jesus said to his disciples:**

**“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,**

**and on earth nations will be in dismay,**

**perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves.**

**People will die of fright**

**in anticipation of what is coming upon the world,**

**for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.**

**And then they will see the Son of Man**

**coming in a cloud with power and great glory.**

**But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect  
and raise your heads  
because your redemption is at hand.**

**“Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy  
from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of  
daily life,  
and that day catch you by surprise like a trap.  
For that day will assault everyone  
who lives on the face of the earth.  
Be vigilant at all times  
and pray that you have the strength  
to escape the tribulations that are imminent  
and to stand before the Son of Man.”**

### *Step 3. Connect to the Waiting World: Pray That You Have Strength*

I am often awakened in the middle of the night by the piercing sound of sirens. Fire trucks race through the streetlights on our corner. Police cars chase unknown threats and roar past our building. I hear deafening trash compactors and squealing brakes from large recycling trucks that collect bottles and cans from bars and businesses. These sharp sounds penetrate my sleep and frighten me in the night. Once I am awake I begin to hear shouts from drug dealers under my window and yells from prostitutes trying to solicit tricks after the bars have closed.

The unwanted alarms wake me, but other fears keep me stirring. My mind begins to chase fears that women waiting to get into the shelter a block away will be raped or otherwise harmed. I wonder if someone in our neighborhood will be shot in the crossfire of fear and hatred, between ignorance and apathy. This is the place where my heart wants to shut down, where my life wants to protect itself. But I realize on the night watch that I cannot choose the sheltered heart, the desire deep within me to ignore the urgent problems, injustices, and the fragile circumstances of the people in my parish and neighborhood. I cannot close out those who suffer all around me.

The fright that settles into my nighttime wakefulness is nothing compared to the dread so many carry within them in the daylight.

I listen patiently to many people who will never live without the ache of a fearful heart. A young veteran corners me in the chapel lobby wanting to talk. His breathing is shallow and beads of sweat drip from his forehead. He slowly tells me that he dreads the beginning of Advent because of gospel readings that speak about the end of time. The shy vet hesitantly unravels the panic of his prayer. He lives every day with great unrest and uncertainty. He has trouble sleeping at night because of his service on the frontlines of war. He cannot close his eyes without seeing again the killing, devastation, and horrific violence, and often panics when he hears unexpected noises outside his apartment. This anxious, perplexed youth cringes with fear that his life might be taken whenever there is a knock on the door or a sudden sound in the street. He remembers the heart-wrenching terror that he felt knowing his troop might be killed if they remained in one place for an entire night.

In the daylight hours, I listen to an elderly woman who still carries the violence of her sexual abuse deep within her heart. She has lived most of her life hiding her emotions, bent over to protect her heart, with her head facing the earth to hide her pain. This weary soul has disassociated her mind from her battered childhood, and she has spent years trying to put the pieces back together—to be freed from the scars of violence. Now she speaks to others and to me about what the violence and maltreatment teaches her. She finally names the fact of her torment with vigilance and seeks healing in her present life. This grey-haired mother now lives in the present, constantly surrendering to the effects of her beaten-down life. She confides in me over and over again that God is always there when she confronts and accepts her pain.

I deeply respect people who must constantly surrender to circumstances beyond their control in order to survive. There is no guarantee that life will work out or that change is around the corner. So many people live with horrific loss and uncertainty. The former soldier and the woman carrying her mental illness want to surrender to God, but worry that God will not be on the other side of that surrender. This is the place of great faith. There is a call to every person during Advent to rest in the security of God's love—to rest in God alone, trusting that he is on the other side of calamity, fear, and surrender.

I hear the Gospel calling us all to surrender to God. This heart-stopping gospel reading roars out at all of us to make sure our lives are open to the powers of God. This sacred text strikes out from

our complacency and self-centeredness. This new season of the liturgical year is meant for all of us to start fresh with a new dependency on the love that God has for us. On first being heard, this text shatters our notion of God and who we are as believers. We surrender to our dismayed and perplexed lives and let ourselves rest in the love of Christ's coming. This Gospel sharpens our desire to make room for love and to surrender all of our attachments in order to find real hope, which will set us free.

No matter our place in life, no matter our status or education or family history, we unshelter our hearts amidst the Advent shakeup. God not only desires to get our attention, but also to make a new home in every decision, movement, and priority in our lives. Jesus challenges us to surrender our hearts to love. Surrendering is difficult when we fear that God will not be there to receive our lives. This is the challenge of exchanging hearts with God. The risk of prayer is certain change for if we pray, we must let go of all that claims us other than the love of God. This is the real foundation of prayer—to offer our hearts to God even when we would rather cling to anxiety, destructive relationships, psychological wounds, drugs, or alcohol. We must continue to find God as the foundation of life so that we can receive the people around us who face needs far greater than our own.

As we begin the Advent journey, we must realize that many events in our lives have far greater meaning than what appears on the surface. There is deeper meaning beyond the pain of life's hardships and even its tragedies. The realization that God is leading our hearts—unsheltering our egos and perspectives—comes when we trust that God is there on the other side of our surrender. We learn in these Advent days to trust the God who calls us to let go.

#### *Step 4. Respond to the Cry of the Prophets*

Advent beckons us to pay attention to what is around us. In the Northern Hemisphere, December days challenge us to find signs of life amid falling leaves, lengthening darkness, and snow-covered fields. Advent begins as the earth cycles pass from the dying of the autumn to the gentle awakening of the earth in the silence of winter cold. If we ponder the earthly signs of change, we come to understand that winter is the beginning of the new growth of spring.

The Gospel of Luke rattles our consciences and disturbs our routines. This wake-up text invites us to look around and ponder

the mysteries of suffering, ambiguity, and uncertainty. We have not reached the perfect kingdom of God on this earth and yet can see in the signs of poverty, loneliness, and selfishness a movement toward perfect life in Christ Jesus. This gospel reading challenges us all to ponder the unbreakable bonds we have in Christ by observing the pain and suffering around us.

Reflect on your life situation today. Where in your life are you being called to wake up to change? What violence, uncertainty, or pain within you or those around you needs your full attention? How does it feel to name and identify these things? How do you think this gospel reading is being heard in your parish community on this First Sunday of Advent?

1. As Advent begins, I view my life as
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. I see the suffering around me, and I
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. I surrender my life to change because

Action: Today I will pray for my surrender to change.

### ***Step 5. Prayer: Writing Your Way to New Birth***

*Take a minute or two to look back at what you have written. Then compose a short prayer offering whatever is in your heart to God. Write it in the space below or simply pray it in the quiet of your heart and mind.*

# MONDAY

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## *Step 1. Welcome the Silence*

*Settle into your prayer space and sit in silence for a minute or two.*

## *Step 2. Discover Your Story within the Word*

*As you make the Sign of the Cross, pray:*

+ O God, unshelter my heart that I may hear and know your holy Word.

*Read the Sunday gospel passage (pages 7–8), and then spend a few minutes in silent reflection on the reading, asking: **For what do I need strength today?***

## *Step 3. Connect to the Waiting World: Pray That You Have Strength*

*Revisit this week's essay on pages 8–10, if it will help your prayer today.*

*Take two to three minutes to think about how well you did with your action from yesterday. Journal about it if that is useful.*

## *Step 4. Respond to the Cry of the Prophets*

This week's Sunday reading from the Gospel of Luke sinks into our hearts and may rouse uncertainty within us. Certainly it would have for the community that first heard it. They believed that Christ would return in glory within their lifetimes, and so the story depicts great fear as they waited. In the anticipation of God's coming again, some people are even dying of fright. While we no longer believe that we live in the imminent moment of Christ's return, we must hear the urgent call of the Gospel, and live with

hearts open to the ways Christ's love is present in the world yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The presence of Christ Jesus that we search for is already here; the love we ponder knows no bounds of time or generation. The urgency of longing, of clinging to the love God has for us, must compel us to share that love with those around us. Advent love is birthed within our fear.

What is the fear that lingers in your life and heart in these opening days of Advent? How might that fear open a door to new life and trust in your relationship with God or with others? How can you prepare your heart to remain open, fearless, and optimistic during the season of Advent? Can you allow Christ to change your fear into hope?

1. Today, the fear that holds me back from God is

2. I bring my fear and my sin to God so that

3. I expect that God

Action: I will examine my heartfelt fears today and imagine how I might confront them.

### ***Step 5. Prayer: Writing Your Way to New Birth***

*Take a minute or two to look back at what you have written. Then compose a short prayer offering whatever is in your heart to God. Write it in the space below or simply pray it in the quiet of your heart and mind.*