

- Advent confronts us with a central question: *Who is at the center of this world? Am I?* And do I see my family and friends, my work and my hobbies, circle *around me* like satellites that orbit the earth? Or, *is God at the center of reality and, therefore, at the heart of my world?*
- Here's another question that gets at the same point: *"What is the worst sin?"* The answer is *not the first one you will think of! The most dangerous sin is, of course, pride, the original sin* at the very beginning Creation. Adam and Eve are placed in the beauty of Eden, with everything they could really want around them. In *the middle* of that Garden, God designates the tree with the fruit they are asked *not to touch nor eat*. *The real significance of this tree lies in how it represents God's will for them, and God's intended place in their lives and in the world.* For the tree is at the *center* of the garden. The decisive moment is when Adam and Eve begin to think about *a different meaning* and *purpose* for that tree. This happens when they begin to believe a *lie* ~ the serpent's lie *that God may not have been honest* with them. As a result, they cease to be honest with God and with each other. *In that moment, God is displaced from the center of their lives, and is no longer the center of their world.*
- *The whole message Advent* can be summed up like this: *God wants once again to be the center of our world.*
- Hearing the prophet Isaiah's words in our first reading, we might wonder *why God predicts that* "the wilderness and the dry land *shall be glad*."¹ *Or why* "the desert *shall rejoice* and blossom." *And why* "the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." *It's because God intends to make things once again like they were in Creation, in the mythical Garden of Eden.* In doing so, God promises to overcome sin and our *fall away from the pattern of Grace*. As a result, "the eyes of the blind shall be

opened and the ears of the deaf *unstopped*... and *the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with... everlasting joy.*"

- *Scripture promises that God wants all this to be true.* Yet, if the Lord promises us all these good things, *what keeps us from experiencing them as reality?* Why do we continue to encounter *adversity* in our lives? And why do we stumble into *conflicts* with others, even when we don't mean to? The answer is the same as it was at the beginning. It is because *we still want to put ourselves at the center of the garden.* We still want to be at the center of the world, and rule our own lives. This is why we resist letting *the living tree, which symbolizes God's presence and will,* to stand gloriously *at the center* of everything. For this is the nature of *pride*, the often-ignored source of every other sin. We so often experience it in the attitude, *"I know better..."* and I've got everything *under control.*"
- *"Be patient,"* says James to us.² *"Be patient" just as a farmer is patient,* waiting through both drought and rain. *When patient, we can be attentive* to how *an unseen higher power is at work,* bringing forth growth. For 'to be patient' is to wait upon another, or upon something we cannot control, and which we need to willing to accept rather than try and change.
- This spirit of *attentive openness* is at the heart of *the third aspect of Mary's response to God's call through the Angel Gabriel.* God's call often challenges us *to live in a different way;* or try and be a different person, especially in our relationships with our family, our friends and those with whom we work. Receiving this call, *we can react at first in fear* at what this call will mean in practice. *We can also respond with uncertainty,* wondering about our worthiness or suitability for what God may have in mind for us.
- But we have also seen that *—in faith— we can go into the heart of our fear, and find God's power. Receiving God's grace,* we can move beyond relying

on our own strength, and not depend upon our estimate of our own abilities and worthiness for what God may have in mind. And we can choose to respond to God's gracious invitation into the Spirit's redeeming work, just as Mary did, by saying, "Yes!" As John Lennon so simply captured the spirit of it, in the words of his famous song, "Let it be!" As Mary said to God through the Angel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be unto me according to thy Word."

- This is the spirit of Mary's response to the message of the angel as portrayed in the third image on the handout we are using this Advent. Take a look at Trygve Skogrand's photo-collage, in the lower right-hand corner.³ The artist has skillfully juxtaposed a traditional painted figure onto a contemporary scene. We see a simplicity and spirit of humility in Mary's posture, as she kneels in her plain gown. In the plain 'bed-sit' room in which she prays, we notice her uplifted eyes. They are now focused on the divine source of the message she is receiving.
- Attentiveness is key to meaningful perception, just as we find in our Gospel reading this morning. John sends his disciples to Jesus with what should be our most persistent question ~ "are you the One?" 'Are you the One for whom we are looking, and whom we are awaiting?' Notice Jesus' response: "Go and tell John what you hear and see..." For they only hear and see if they are attentive. This is one reason why the Church sets aside this season of Advent ~ to encourage our attentiveness, so that we can hear and see, and then accept God's Word to us.
- "Let it be as God would have it." Let things be as God wills. Let God be God! Perhaps nothing will be so hard in our lives, as to say those words in faith and in humility. Our pride objects! Our desire to be at the center of reality intrudes. But to say, "Let it be..." in faith and in humility, is to return to the

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Garden of Creation Grace. And it is also to begin to live forward into the Kingdom, as God would have things be.

- *"Go and tell John what you hear and see!"* Go and tell *others* what your faith has disclosed to you. *Those are the Lord's words to us, today.* They depend upon 'letting *God* be God,' at the center of our lives, at the center of our thoughts and our consciousness. *When we do*, we begin to see what God is doing *through* Jesus, in the power of his Holy Spirit. We begin to see how *the Lord is healing our own sight and helping us rightly hear his Word.* Then we begin to see how he is helping others regain their strength, be brought to new life, *and given real hope for the future.*
- And so we can join with Mary, as she says, 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and *my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*... the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.'



The Annunciation by 1) Simone Martini (*above*);
2) Dante Gabriel Rossetti (*right*); 3) Trygve Skogrand
(*lower right*); and 4) El Greco (*below*).



For the four Sundays of Advent:
{clockwise:} *Apprehensive / Introspective*
Attentive / Accepting with Joy



Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “[Go and tell John what you hear and see](#): the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Notes:

¹ See Isaiah 35:1-10.

² See James 5:7-10.

³ The title of which is *Bedsit Annunciation* (2008). An art website offers this brief biography of the artist: “Trygve Skogrand was born in the late 60's as the son of a country dean, and grew up in the beautiful Norwegian countryside. This peaceful childhood have influenced his art with the longing for harmony and a serene beauty. Skogrand originally educated and worked as a Civil Engineer in City Planning, before re-educating as a visual artist in his early thirties. His art has been exhibited in widely in Norway, and been published as two art books. In addition to his work as a contemporary artist, Skogrand writes and illustrates children's picture books, and designs glassware and book covers. He currently lives and works in the town of Malmö in the south of Sweden.”