



**Advent 2023, Week 1 Reflection**

## STAY AWAKE AND SLOW DOWN

*Welcome to the Advent audio retreat, presented by Jesuit Connections, a program of the Office of Ignatian Spirituality. We'll provide a short audio reflection on a theme or liturgical reading from each week in Advent. May these clips deepen our personal and collective preparation for Christmas. And so let's pause for the next several minutes, take a deep breath, and enter intentionally into the First Week of Advent as we seek to "Stay Awake and Slow Down." This week's reflection was written by Zach Conti, an alum of the Contemplative Leaders in Action program in Washington, DC...*

...

The first week of Advent begins with Jesus telling his disciples that no one "knows when the time will come" and urging them to remain watchful so they are not "found sleeping" when the Lord returns. Jesus' words are a reminder that Advent is not simply "pre-Christmas." Rather, the Church teaches that it is also a season of preparation for Christ's second coming. Each year at Advent, I often find myself asking what exactly it means for me to be prepared? Or to put it in Jesus' words, how can I resist falling asleep?

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine what it is like to be physically sleepy.

I know that when I'm sleepy, I feel physically sluggish and mentally hazy. I may be more likely to take shortcuts and less likely to think critically or closely perceive what is going on around me, including other people. In short, I'm just going through the motions to get by for the day, and I can tell I'm not at my best. When I feel this way, I usually try to slow down, recover, and re-orient myself. This might be a 20-minute power nap if I'm lucky, or perhaps it's taking a moment to pause for a mental break and savor a small joy for the day.

In the same way slowing down is an important tool for combating physical sleepiness, so too is it essential for combating spiritual sleepiness.

The spiritual sleepiness Jesus is referring to is being lulled into thoughtless absorption in our own pursuit of worldly goods—money, status, power, or comfort, for example—while forgetting our call to live out the Gospel as disciples preparing for our Lord's return.



["The alarm clock"](#) by [Sziif](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

While Jesus tells us we won't know when the time will come, he does tell us what to expect upon the Lord's return and how to be prepared for it. I often think of his words in Matthew 25: 31-46, in which Jesus warns us against failing to recognize the face of God in those who society marginalizes. Jesus tells us that people who resisted falling asleep were those who prioritized the Gospel call to welcome strangers and feed the hungry during their lifetimes. Although they didn't know it until the final hour, they were already prepared for the Lord's return—because by honoring the dignity of those on the margins, they had been honoring God all along during their lifetimes.

I find myself feeling both comforted and challenged reading Jesus' words here and reflecting on my own Advent preparation.

It brings me comfort to hear Jesus tell us that God is in all people, and I am inspired by his example of uncompromising commitment to the dignity of every person. At the same time, it challenges me because I know I must practice detachment from worldly concerns enough to share that same commitment.

In describing the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius observed, "Let everyone keep in mind that, in all things that concern the spiritual life, progress is in proportion to getting out of ... self-interest" (SpEx. 189). In other words, the core of spiritual preparation is shrinking the influence of ego to develop the interior freedom that allows us to respond to God's call, which is to love more fully even when it is costly.

The pressure of living in a hyper-individualistic society with an unhealthy attachment to consumption, status, and distraction does not make cultivating interior freedom easy.

At times in recent years, I've felt like it's gotten harder to resist spiritual sleepiness. Sometimes it just feels much easier to harden my heart or to get wrapped up in focusing only on my own concerns with everyday life. So I'm always delighted when Advent arrives, because it gives me the perfect opportunity to shake off spiritual sleepiness by slowing down. In fact, Advent is my favorite liturgical season!

When I create a prayer space centered around my Advent wreath, I feel a sense of peace and hope wash over me as I watch the dancing flames gently cast a warm glow around me. As the candles remind me of the warmth of God's embrace and the light of hope piercing even the darkest moments, I find it easier to enter the inner door of my heart and sit with God alone. It is in this space of solitude and silence with God where I am best able to pause my daily concerns, feel loved by God, reflect on how he has already transformed my life, and discern how he is calling me to *further* transform my life and the world around me.

As we begin this Advent season, we are invited to slow down and ask ourselves: How am I resisting spiritual sleepiness and preparing for the Lord?

...

*We look forward to spending our Advent season together as we prepare intentionally for Christmas. Thank you for joining us for this week's reflection, presented by Jesuit Connections, a program of the Office of Ignatian Spirituality. We hope this audio retreat stokes the fires of*



*your daily contemplation! Join us next week, when we'll ponder "Your Gifts – An Important Part of God's Story."*

---

***Reflection questions:***

- *How am I resisting spiritual sleepiness and preparing for the Lord?*
  - *How am I being invited to discern how to transform my own life this Advent season?*
  - *What can I let go of what is preventing me from seeing the needs of others around me?*
-

## Opening & Closing Prayers

### **Advent Prayer by Henri J. M. Nouwen**

Lord Jesus,  
Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do and seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day,

We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Amen.

### **Advent Prayer of Light by Joyce Rupp (Adapted)**

Emmanuel,

You are Everlasting Light.

Help me to bring your love  
everywhere I go.

Possess my whole being so fully this Advent  
that all my life will be a radiance of you.

Shine through me and be so in me  
that everyone I come in contact with today  
may feel your presence in my spirit.

Let them look and see, not just me,

but you, Light of all Lights,  
shining through me.

- *Adapted from John Cardinal Newman's prayer*