

MOVING TOWARD THE MANGER

REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF
FREDERICK BUECHNER

Creative
Communications
Sample

BY MARTINE E. MARTY

Introduction

In the Advent season, there is always a lot of movement, a lot of “hustle and bustle,” with people traveling to see loved ones, shoppers going out to the stores, revelers heading for the latest holiday party, concert or event. But one movement needs to be remembered above all others: our movement toward the manger, where the Christ Child is born. He is the reason we are celebrating after all, and he is the only one who can move us out of darkness and sin and into the bright light of God’s glory, forgiveness and salvation. When the shepherds moved toward the manger, they ran, and we can, too, spiritually speaking: going as fast as we can to Scripture each day of this Advent season, to read and reflect and ponder upon the Word encircled in straw for our eternal benefit. May these devotions nudge you ever closer to that amazing miracle.



The First Sunday of Advent: God So Loved the World

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:7-11

Should this book of daily devotions fall into the hands of someone who has never been in touch with the Bible or Christian people, its title might be confusing. The words *moving* and *toward* are clear to all, but then comes *manger*. Dairy farmers or builders of barns for them will know it, because they move toward mangers, as do cows, for very practical purposes, including feeding and eating. Those who read the Bible, whether in literature classes, hotel rooms, churches or in solitude, will instantly identify the *manger* with the Christmas story, for the infant Jesus, we are told, was “laid” in one. The Gospel stories take it from there into all the world.

What did they take, and what do we who are “moving toward” this one carry with us? “Faith” is very frequently here; not far down the list (230 occurrences) is “love.” Paul the Apostle proposed that now, while we know “in part,” faith is demanded and cherished, but in the end, beyond, when the partial is no longer needed, we affirm that “love never ends.” Why? Because “the love of God was made manifest among us” when “God sent his Son into the world.” The season we call “Advent” will find us “moving toward the manger,” but the love we know there will continue. The writer John wants to be sure that we get the point of it all: “If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” In faith and hope we can pledge: *we will* do so.

Lord, help us carry your love beyond the manger, through all weeks, all years. Amen.

Monday, the First Week of Advent

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

1 John 4:9

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will.”
(*Wishful Thinking*, 54)

Today we begin moving toward the manger, a strange destination. Mangers are troughs where cows eat, not holy places for thoughtful seekers. Unless we live on or near dairy farms, we may have little knowledge of them and nothing to do with them. They show up on greeting cards, which get tossed or filed with old things in the forthcoming new year. Sometimes, one is a prop in children’s Nativity pageants. Were it not for such appearances, we would not be likely to think of them at all.

Yet today we are invited, even bidden, to stir ourselves and stumble toward a particular manger, one mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, wherein the infant Jesus was laid. What we will find there is the signal of God’s love, the love that changes everything. At the manger we do not have to be content with pleasant spiritual thoughts or poetic words. We ask for more: that God will *show* love, will “manifest” it again. Yesterday, we started again to move toward the manger. Doing so demands more than thoughts and words alone: we are told that it will be a loving “act of will.”

So, because Love beckons, we act.

Lord, stir us to move purposefully toward the manger, where God’s love is manifest. Amen.

Tuesday, the First Week of Advent

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin." (*Wishful Thinking*, 15)

To speak of someone living "inside somebody's else's skin," as a colloquial phrase has it, would in many ears at most times sound a) gross and b) impossible. "Gross," one thinks, because it is *my* private skin, not anyone else's, and it is personally irreplaceable, not to be transferred. Yet it serves to suggest one's effort at being empathic. Existing thus, a person would be expected to see what another sees, to hear what he or she hears, to suffer and hope and rejoice in what that other person experiences.

If living thus in a human-to-human relation is hard to picture, it sounds *really* gross and *totally* impossible to picture the Creator of numberless galaxies overcoming distance and our differing qualities to identify with human creatures—each of us!—and to take on our circumstances. Not only that, this identifying all-powerful Creator will come to us as a typically helpless child in a manger, as a human among humans. All this happens as an act of compassion, a movement of love, a readiness to be given for others, even to death.

If we think of all this as climaxing in a "sometimes fatal capacity for feeling" we will have grasped something of the divine act which we will recognize at the manger.

Lord, as you have identified with us, let your love shine through us to others. Amen.

Wednesday, the First Week of Advent

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

Hebrews 1:1-2

God never seems to weary of trying to get himself across. Word after word he tries in search of the right word. When the Creation itself doesn't seem to say it right—sun, moon, stars, all of it—he tries flesh and blood.” (*Wishful Thinking*, 97)

To speak of the Creator of everything “trying” something may suggest that there are limits on his all-powerfulness. The phrase sounds self-contradictory and almost blasphemous. Yet we read that he “tries” one covenant with one people but then, in love, extends his favor to all. Most of all, God sets out to convince people that he intends a great future and hope for them, but they go about their business on their own, thus destining themselves to repeated failures.

To make things very clear, God long spoke “by the prophets,” people of many sorts in different circumstances. Prophets could not have been more clear “at many times and in many ways,” and still people wandered and “tried” their own ways. The manger in the Gospel story, whose purpose we interpret and celebrate in the Advent season, “spoke” of a new beginning, a “way” to make more clear than the words of the prophets had done, that God was not going to stop trying to break through.

The Jesus who lay in the manger toward which we are moving these weeks, was and is the decisive breakthrough in God’s loving reach. Now, seeing God among us, loving us, we “get it,” and the acts of God “trying” are in reach for us, reaching for us.

Lord, we are thankful that you have not given up on us when we needed you. Amen.

Thursday, the First Week of Advent

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:10

“To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away for love.” (*Wishful Thinking*, 83)

The word *propitiation* is not likely to turn up in our reading or talk today or tonight after it shows up in this devotion. While we give God enough about which to be angry, and while we don't erase texts that don't always speak directly to us, we find that the picture of God with which we live is not of an angry, vengeful and punitive God who keeps on needing to be appeased, but is the loving Father of the weak infant in the manger. The word *propitiation* survives and helps us take the seriousness of God seriously, and then gives us more reason than ever to be grateful for what God does about us in our shortcomings and offenses.

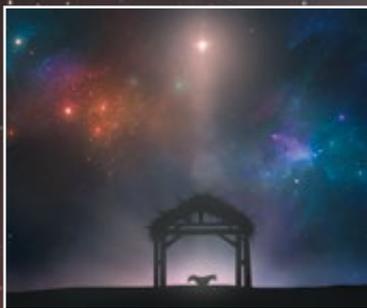
In a saying for today we pay attention to what God does to produce holiness. God sacrifices so we don't have to, and does so through the gift of his own Son, Jesus. We don't have to dwell on long and hard words like *propitiation* when we can realize its effect in the story of the infant who died and lives.

God's sacrifice, which is available to make us holy, is the gift of his Son. Religions often promote holiness by keeping rare treasures under lock and key. No, in the biblical stories, God produces the holy and promotes it by “giving it away for love,” beginning with Jesus in a manger.

Lord, let the sacrifice of your Son, an infant in the manger, make us holy. Amen.

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Move toward the manger of Christ this Advent with Frederick Buechner, one of the greatest Christian theological minds of our time. Each day of Advent, thought-provoking quotes from Beuchner's beloved works are paired with insightful reflections by preeminent religious commentator and biblical scholar Martin E. Marty, accompanied by Bible readings and prayers. Let this depth of wisdom prepare your hearts to cradle Christ.

Frederick Buechner is a theologian and the author of more than 30 published books and has been an important source of inspiration and learning for many readers. His work encompasses different genres, including fiction, autobiography, essays and sermons, and his career has spanned six decades. Buechner's books have been translated into many languages for publication around the world.

Martin E. Marty, Ph.D., served as a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School for 35 years before retiring in 1998. He has been a columnist and senior editor for *The Christian Century* magazine since 1956 and has authored over 60 books.

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