

*Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."*

*Luke 1:38*

We now light the fourth candle of the Advent wreath and open the last few doors of the Advent calendar. Our countdown is almost complete, our lists nearly all checked off. Only the last few items remain to be purchased and wrapped, and there is a sense of the world winding down. For many of us, we can now stop to enjoy that experience for which we have so diligently prepared.

Saint Francis of Assisi gave us the gift of the Nativity scene after he grew weary of the materialism rampant in Italy in 1223. We are no different in our world today, as commercialism overshadows this holy event. Just as the people in the time of Saint Francis needed something to bring them back to the meaning of Christ, so too do we need the reminder of the creche. Many of us feel fatigued or we worry about all kinds of things that can spoil what is meant to be a joyous occasion. Whether we consciously realize it or not, our hearts are longing for that which cannot be bought or wrapped or placed under a tree.

We stand in life as do the figures in the Nativity scene, waiting around an empty manger. If we believe the good news, we wait with hope and we wait with joyful anticipation of the promise of Christ. What is important is not the number of lights on the tree, or how pretty the bows are on the presents, or even if there *are* presents under a tree. What is most important is that within our hearts a space has been prepared and we are ready to receive the most precious and sacred gift of all.

In these last days of Advent, may we wait in peace with holy longing and joyful anticipation.