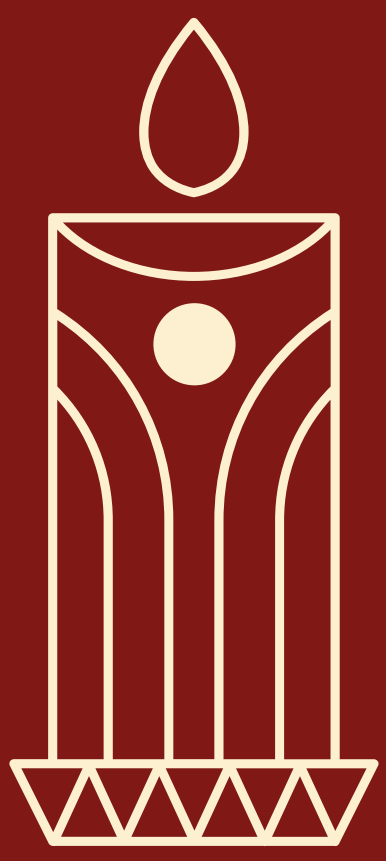
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PRACTICING

ADVENT

WEEK 1

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Silence

There are 400 years separating the Old and the New Testaments.

During that time, God sent no prophets to speak to the people on His behalf.

He was not absent, but He *was* silent.

And, in the silence, the people waited.

THEN GOD BROKE HIS SILENCE IN THE MOST INCREDIBLE WAY.

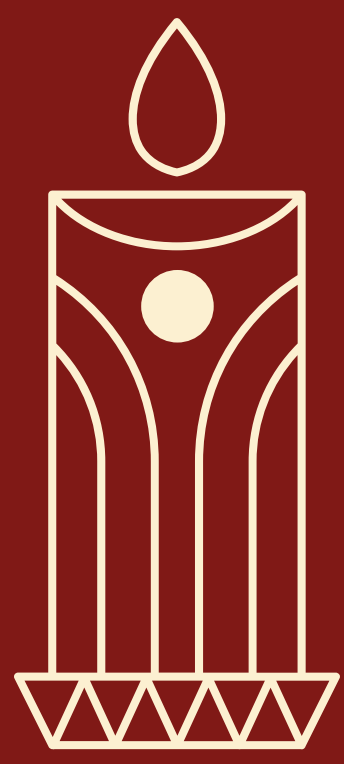
But, for us, that's still ahead.

For now, during Advent, we join with the people of God in the waiting.

In the anticipation.

In the hope.

But also in the uncertainty, in the fear, in the doubt.



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OUR TENDENCY IS TO RUN FROM SILENCE.

Let's be honest. Silence is uncomfortable.

But what if silence was an invitation?

An invitation to be with God - to simply be in His presence, to reflect and meditate on who He Is and what He has done, to attune ourselves to His voice should He decide to speak?

"Be still and know that I am God."

|| Psalm 46:10, NIV

LET'S EMBRACE THE SILENCE – LET'S EVEN SEEK IT OUT.

Take 5 minutes everyday this week to be silent before the Lord.

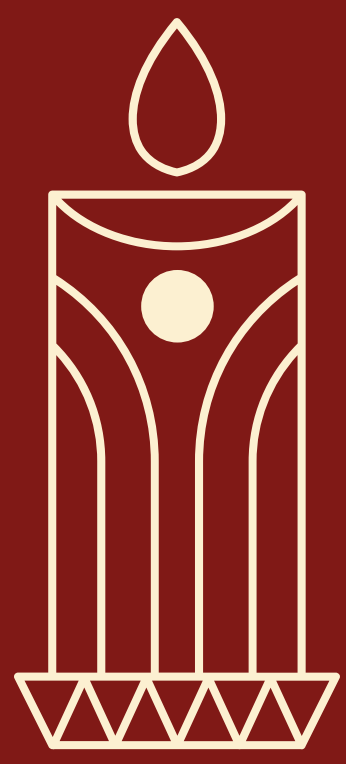
Remove every distraction within your control.

Then, breathe in and breathe out.

You may want to choose a verse or even a single word to medidate on.

You may want to simply pray, "I'm here, God, and I'm listening if you want to speak."

You may want to have a journal nearby in case He does.



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REMEMBER, THIS IS A *PRACTICE*.

Don't be discouraged if your mind wanders.

Bring whatever is distracting you back to God in prayer.

Breathe in and breathe out again.

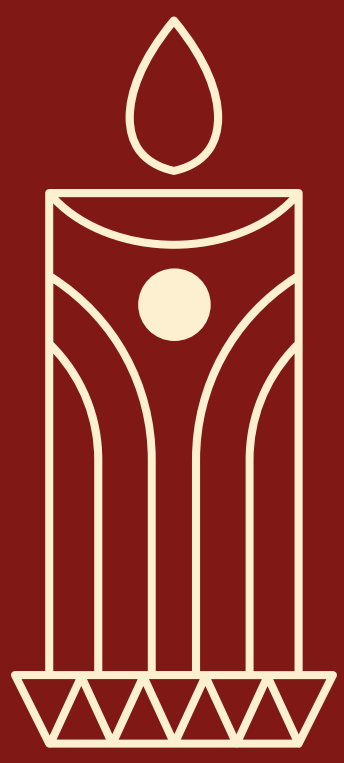
Don't worry about getting it "right."

Just show up - and keep showing up.

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:

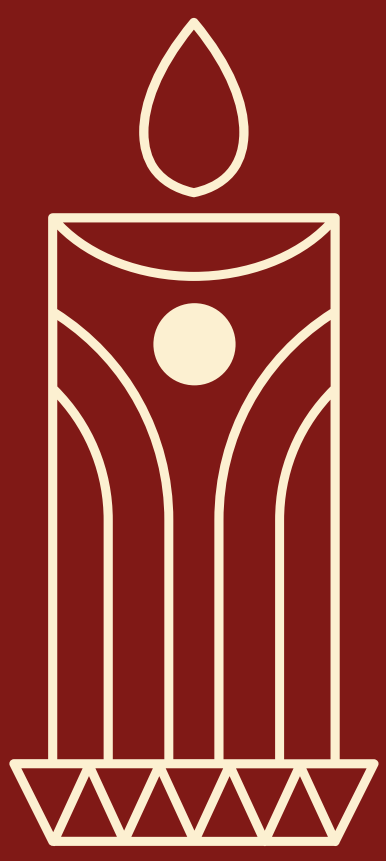
"In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength..."

|| Isaiah 30:15, NIV



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Prayer

WAITING IS NOT A WASTE OF TIME.

Ours is a culture driven by productivity.

We're trained to fill every gap.

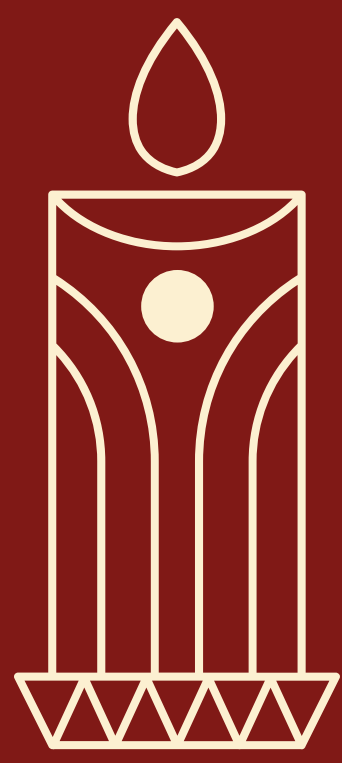
We judge our days by what we got done.

We impulsively check our phones so we don't miss *anything*.

Waiting grinds against all that we've been conditioned to value.

Waiting challenges our desire for resolution - and when and how that resolution comes about.

Waiting, frankly, can feel like a waste of time because there may be no discernable results day in and day out - at least not how we'd define "results."



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WE ACTIVELY ENGAGE IN SEASONS OF WAITING THROUGH PRAYER.

Prayer is, so often, what we turn to as a last resort - what we do only when there is nothing else to do, when we've exhausted all other options, when we just can't fix or solve or force anything ourselves.

But going to God in prayer ought to be the *first* thing we do in *every* situation.

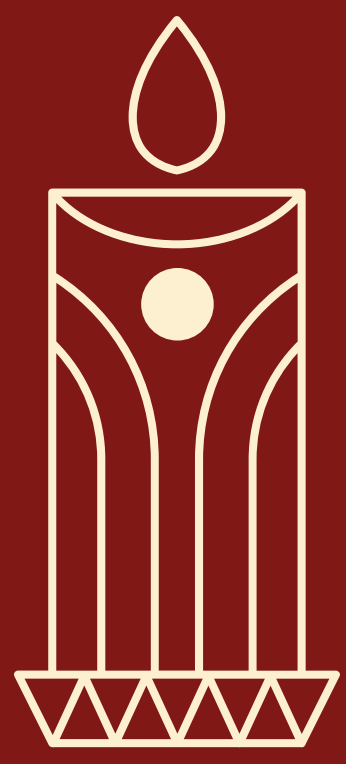
It won't come naturally right away.

But that's why it's called a *practice* of prayer.

SO WHAT IF WE USED THIS ADVENT, THIS SEASON OF WAITING, TO PRACTICE PRAYER?

What if we submitted our waiting to God?

What if we asked Him to use our waiting for His purposes - to humble our hearts, to reorient our minds, to strengthen our trust?



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LET'S GIVE HIM OUR DAYS OF WAITING.

Begin your day by reading Psalm 5:3.

In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.

|| Psalm 5:3, NIV

Then do just that - lay your requests before God.

Tell Him what you're waiting for right now and what you're hoping He'll do.

Ask Him to give you the patience to wait on His timing.

THEN, COME BACK TO HIM AT THE END OF THE DAY.

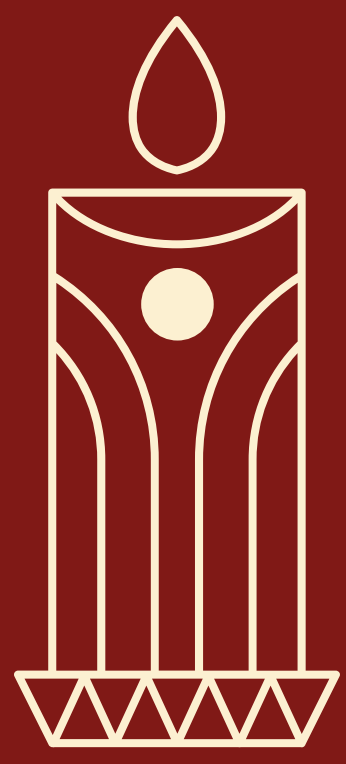
Take a couple of deep breaths and reflect on your day.

Consider what you are grateful for and then express that gratitude to God.

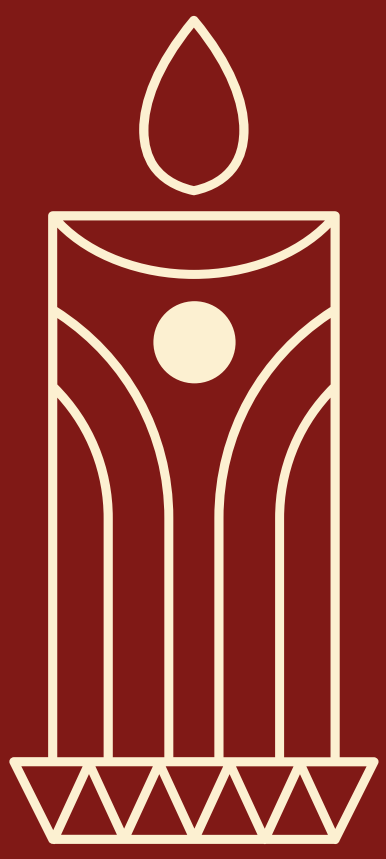
Think about how you responded to people and situations throughout your day and submit those people and situations to God.

Pray through the following day - decisions to make, conversations to have, and so forth.

Ask God to help you be aware of His prompting as you go forward.



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Scripture

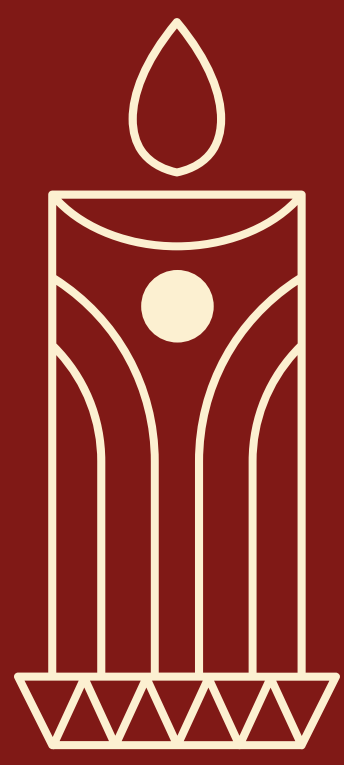
WHEN YOU'RE WAITING *FOR* GOD, WAIT *WITH* GOD.

So often we think of waiting as waiting *for* God - and, often, we are!

But what if while we were waiting *for* God, we also waited *with* God?

What if a season of waiting was an invitation to spend time with God - seeking Him out, learning to trust, considering how He wants you to grow?

Advent is a perfect opportunity to begin spending regular time with God - or to come back to regular time with God if its been a while.



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ADVENT ENDS WHEN JESUS COMES – "GOD WITH US."

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ||
John 1:14, NIV

Jesus was the answer to God's promise to send a Messiah – a Savior.

But the people waited *hundreds* of years for the fulfillment of that promise.

What better way to spend that waiting than to spend it with the one you're waiting on?

BEING WITH GOD IS HOW YOU LEARN TO SEE GOD IN THE WAITING.

It's usually fairly evident when a season of waiting has come to an end.

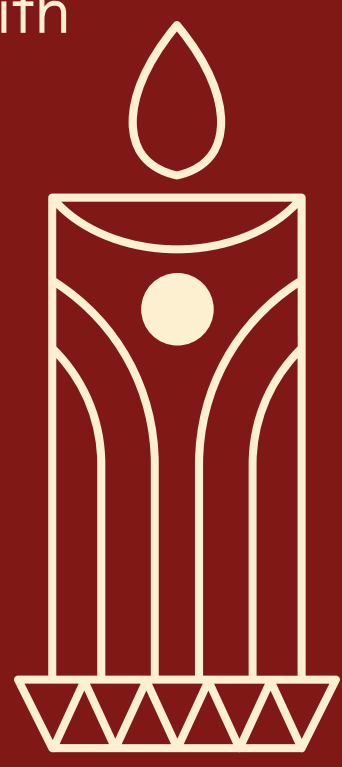
What may be less obvious is what God is doing in the waiting.

Spending time with God familiarizes us with His ways and attunes us to His voice.

But maybe that feels overwhelming.

Maybe you've tried but given up.

Maybe you just don't know where or how to begin.



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KEEP IT SIMPLE.

Choose a book of the Bible to read through.

* We recommend starting with one of the four biographies of Jesus in the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Choose an amount of time to read every day.

* For example, 15-20 minutes is usually a good starting point.

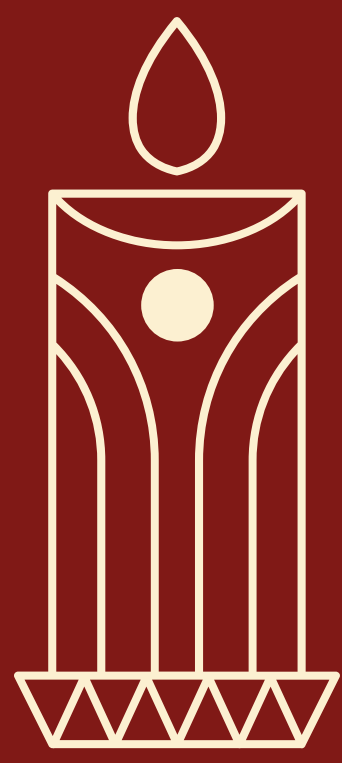
  It's long enough to actually get into your reading, but not so long that it's not sustainable.

Then just start reading!

Read for your allotted time and then just mark where you left on when you're done.

If you miss a day, just pick up the next day!

You can't get behind because you're not trying to check an item off of a list.



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KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO NEXT.

When you get near the end of the book you're going through, have a plan for what you're going to read next.

The quickest way to lose momentum is to be unsure as to how you're going to spend your time with God.

If you want to increase the likelihood of sticking with your plan to spend time with God, invite a friend to do it with you and then schedule a time to discuss what you're learning and how you're sensing God wanting you to grow in your faith.

TIME WITH GOD WON'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT.

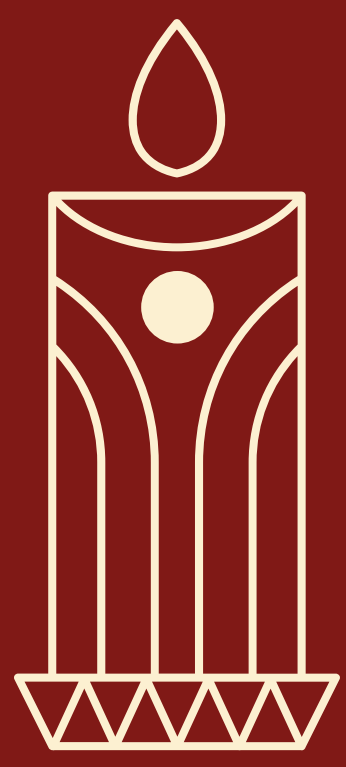
Advent is meant to be a time when we slow down but, let's be honest, our schedules during the holidays are usually packed to the brim.

Spending time with God won't just happen.

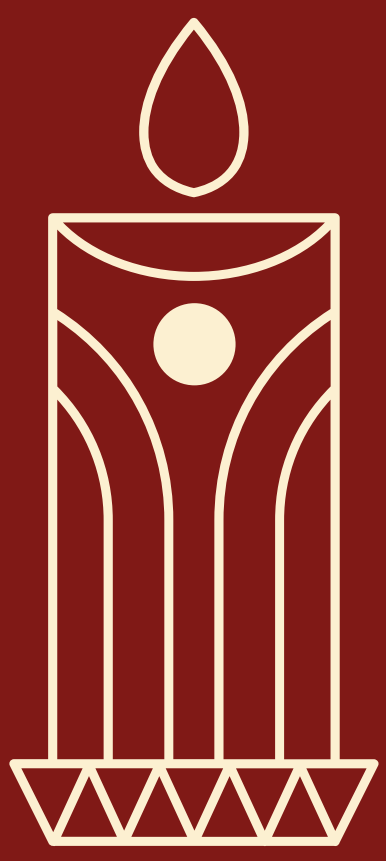
You have to *make* the time.

But, if you do, it will be the best, most valuable time you spend all of Advent.

So, what step will you take today to make sure it happens?



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PRACTICING

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WEEK 4

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Generosity

WE GIVE BECAUSE GOD GAVE FIRST.

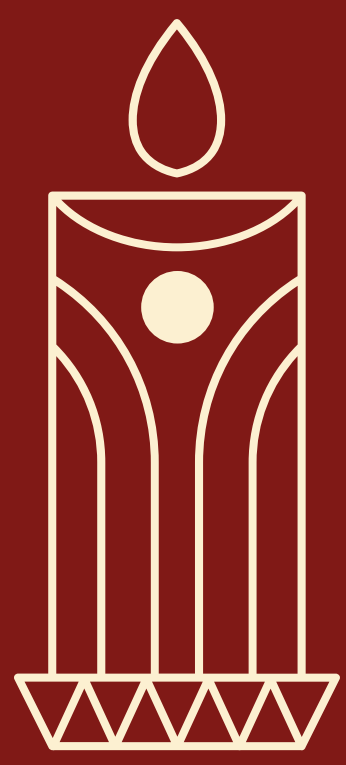
For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
|| John 3:16, NIV

The heart of God is one of generosity.

At Advent we anticipate God keeping His promise of a Messiah in the most generous way imagineable.

He sent His Son – in the person of Jesus – to live the perfect life we could never live and to die the death we deserved to die as a result of our sin.

If generosity marks the character of God then it also ought to mark those of us that have been called to represent and reflect Him to the world.



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GENEROSITY IS A POSTURE OF THE HEART.

Generosity, we may mistakenly believe, is a wonderful aspiration, but most of us simply can't *afford* to be generous.

But generosity is a heart posture that recognizes that all we have belongs to God and has been entrusted to us for His purposes.

Your ability to be generous, then, has nothing to do with how much or how little is in your bank account but rather with a heart posture that seeks to glorify God and serve others in everything - even sacrificially so.

GENEROSITY IS AN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE.

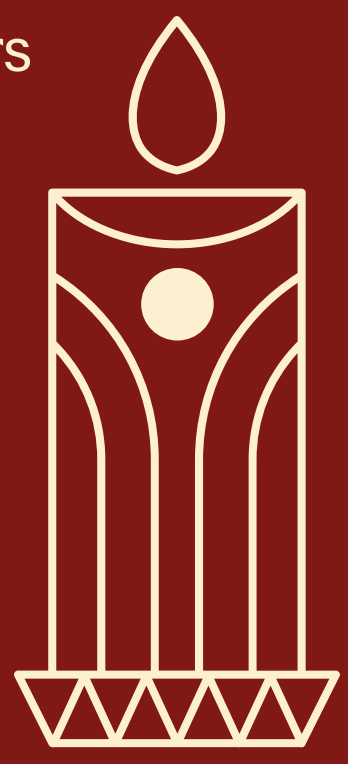
God has been undeniably generous to us.

Generosity towards others, then, is an expression of gratitude for all that God has done in our lives.

We are not meant to be the endpoints of God's generosity, but rather conduits of His generosity.

And, through our generosity, we love others as God has loved us.

"You can give without loving. But you cannot love without giving."
|| Amy Carmichael, Missionary



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PRACTICING GENEROSITY

We tend to think of generosity in the narrow sense of monetary generosity.

We can and should give generously of our money, of course - after all, that *too* belongs to God and has been entrusted to us for His purposes.

But we can also be generous with our time and our attention - which can be an incredible sacrifice during an already busy season.

We can be generous with our gifts and our abilities - using what we can do in service of others.

In other words, there is not one way to be generous.

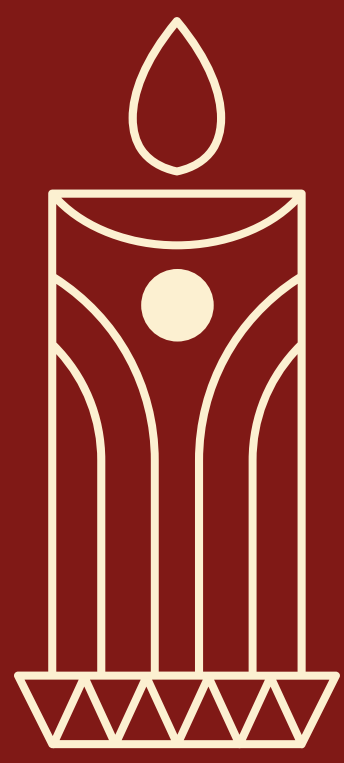
WHERE DO YOU FIND IT MOST DIFFICULT TO BE GENEROUS?

You may find that one form of generosity comes easier than another.

For instance, you may be abundantly generous with your time but struggle to ever open your wallet.

You may be joyful in using your gifts and abilities to serve others, but have little patience for otherwise giving of your time and attention.

You get the idea.



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WHAT WOULD STRETCH YOU TO GROW IN GENEROSITY?

Consider where you find it most difficult to give generously.

Then, this Advent, do *that*.

If it's with your money, then practice opening your wallet.

If it's your time, practice by signing up to serve.

If it's your gifts and abilities, practice by asking around to find a way to uniquely help others.

REMEMBER THAT THIS IS A *PRACTICE*.

A practice means you're working to get better at it.

But getting better at it means pushing yourself beyond what currently feels comfortable.

It won't happen by accident.

But cultivating a *generous* heart that bursts forward from a *grateful* heart is a beautiful witness to the world.

