

## **“The World in Solemn Stillness Waits”**

Prepared for an Advent Retreat  
Our Lady of Perpetual Help

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“The peace of the Lord be with you all.”

Isn't it lovely just resting here together on this island of peace and tranquility? Wouldn't it be nice if we could stay like this all day, all week and for the rest of Advent?

Yes, it would. But so such luck!

There's too much to do! So much to arrange. So many things to prepare. Places to go and people to see as we try to make this holiday season a joyous one for all the people we love. So, maybe we should just count ourselves lucky that we get to have these few hours of respite together before we jump back into the fray of Advent.

That's one way of handling the stress of the season, to be sure, and a fine one, too, grabbing moments of peace and quiet, where and when we can, giving ourselves the chance to reset, refocus and recharge. Starting the day with prayer. Ending the day with prayer. Making sure to get to Mass and making time to come to a mini-retreat like this one.

I'm going to call this the “action-prayer” balance strategy because what we're trying to do is offset the weight of Advent activities with the weight of prayer, so we don't let the scales tip so far towards busyness that we risk forgetting what the season is all about and end up swamped by stress. All well and good.

But, this afternoon, I'd like to propose to you an entirely different kind of Advent balance, not the kind done with scales, but the one we see every time a dancer takes his or her place on the stage.

In a ballet, we watch men and women leaping and twirling, bending and lifting, balancing on the tippy toes of one foot, dipping into graceful arabesques, arms floating up and down, yet somehow not falling over, which certainly wouldn't be the case if I tried any such thing. Why? Because they've got something I haven't got—abs of steel. All of that graceful movement is supported by an invisible, but rock solid core.

It makes me wonder though: Would it be possible for us to find a similar solid core this Advent that would support us in the middle of all of the tree trimming, meal planning, card sending, gift wrapping, cookie baking, party giving....and cleaning up?

I think so.

But, I fear it won't be so easy to learn because we actually have to practice it in the middle of all our Advent activities—a kind of learning by doing. But if we can, there is a very good chance that we will free ourselves from the weight of all the season's stress, the way a ballerina's solid core frees her from gravity.

Want to give it a try?

OK. To begin, let me transport you, like the Ghost of Christmas Past, back in time to the house of my friend, Katy, where preparations for a Christmas Eve dinner are underway. I love Katy, but my heart aches for my dear friend because, as she will freely admit, at times like this she can be one tight little ball of stress. Always wanting to do her very best and trying to make things as perfect as they can be for her guests, Katy sets a pretty high standard for herself. But given that she can't control everything and given the tendency for things outside her control to go completely sideways, anxiety is a common occurrence in Katy's life. So, what is this lovely lady doing on Christmas Eve? Why, she's doing what she does every Christmas Eve—hosting dinner for 35 people!

But this year it will be different because, for the very first time and in a Herculean effort to corral her stress, Katy is having everything catered in. She'll still serve the dishes she always serves—beef tenderloin, ravioli, salad, French baguettes and dessert. But without having to shop, prep or cook, for once, she'll have the chance to enjoy her own dinner party.

Naturally, she has a few butterflies worrying that the caterers won't show up on time, but thanks be to God, there's the doorbell—ding, dong!

In come the caterers with their foil-covered pans and they put them on the kitchen island before dashing off to their next delivery. Delicious aromas fill the room. Katy peeks under the foil protecting beautiful tenderloins, smiles in satisfaction then pops them in the oven to keep warm.

She lifts the salad into her big serving bowls, but hunting for the dressing, realizes they haven't sent quite enough. But, no problem. That's not going to upset our Katy. She has olive oil and lemons; she can make more in a jiffy.

Next it's time to transfer the ravioli into her baking dishes, but when she lifts the foil, she sees, to her utter horror—ravioli covered in vodka sauce! Her heart sinks; her blood pressure spikes. But why? Because she didn't order vodka sauce, that's why; she ordered marinara. Now, no one is allergic to vodka and no one is particularly expecting marinara, but, that's..not..the..point!

Doing her best to keep calm, but starting to seethe, Katy opens the bag of mini-baguettes. But instead of finding three dozen, they've sent only 12. Twelve measly baguettes for 35 people.

“Sam!” she hollers at her son in a panic, “You've got to go to the Whole Foods and get there now. I need two dozen more baguettes as fast as you can. Go!”

Sam grabs the car keys just as the doorbell rings. The guests are arriving and Katy's head is pounding. Her husband takes charge of coats and drinks and quick as a flash, Sam is back—with two big brown paper bags. A huge wave of relief floods Katy's body until she opens them up.

“Sam!” she yells. “What have you done? These aren't baguettes, these are Kaiser rolls. Kaiser rolls!”

“Mom, it's Christmas Eve. The bakery was practically empty. It was all they had.”

She feels nausea in the pit of her stomach, tears begin to sting her eyes. Frustration, rage, panic and fear rear their ugly heads.

Katy, Katy, Katy, Katy, Katy, “You are anxious and worried about many things.”

We all know that famous line spoken at another dinner party, two thousand years ago, to another stressed out woman who was hard at work getting the food ready while her sister was lollygagging instead of helping. And we know how Jesus corrected her: “**There is need of only one thing.** Mary has **chosen the better part** and it will not be taken from her.”

The better part. The one and only thing. Jesus seems to be telling Martha that quiet time at the foot of the Lord is better than all the housework, dinner preparation and hosting she's focused on.

But that can't be right, can it? People have to eat, after all. Jesus can't possibly be saying that sitting in solemn stillness waiting to hear the angels sing is the only thing we need to do this Advent, can he?

No, I don't think so. Instead, I think he wants Martha to do something entirely different and he starts by telling her why it is she's going to have trouble whether she cooking or praying. Martha, Martha, your heart is anxious; your mind is worried; your abs need a lot of work.

Now, to be honest, sometimes I think we miss the power of this particular line in the Gospel because the priests or deacons I know often read it in an even-toned, matter-of-fact way. “Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.” But I'll bet it didn't really sound like that.

So, imagine for a moment you've invited Fr. Jerry or Fr. Larry to be the guest of honor at your dinner party. He's chatting with your guests in the living room but now dinner is ready. Everyone needs to get to the table. It's a crucial moment and it takes some choreography. Because we hosts and hostesses don't have under-butlers and footmen like at Downton Abbey, we do this job ourselves, unless we can press someone else to help.

How would you do it, if it were your dinner party? Probably like I would. I'd gently tap my sister on the shoulder to draw her away from her conversation with Father and whisper in her ear, “Mary, darling, dinner's ready. Could you help me a little, please?”

But not if I were Martha, simmering with resentment. Frankly, every time I hear this Gospel, I'm shocked at what she does next—something no hostess I know would ever do. She marches straight to her guest of honor and gets mad at him. How would it sound if I did that? “Father, I'm going nuts here! Don't you see how much I've got to do? Will you please tell my sister to stop listening to you and get her to come help me in the kitchen!” Not the way to start a dinner party.

That petulant, peevisish tone, I think, is what Jesus heard and why he pointed out her abs had the strength of pudding. “Martha, you are *anxious and worried* about many things.” You need to get a grip.

So what was Martha so anxious and worried about anyway? Probably the things we all get anxious and worried about. That the food she spent so much time preparing would be ruined. That her dinner wouldn't be as good as the one Jesus had at someone else's house last week. Or maybe that she and Mary had had an argument about housework and Martha is still mad at her? Who knows? The whole story in Luke is only five verses long.

What did Jesus want her to do? Forget about her dinner, order a pizza and come and sit down with Mary? I don't think so.

Instead, I think he wanted her to find the peace of heart Mary had found sitting at his feet—to tighten her abs—in *the midst of her work*. Mary might be experiencing the better part, but he was asking Martha to step up **the harder part**: To become like a dancer, solid in a peaceful core in the middle of her flurry of activity.

“To live in the world and not be of the world”—simultaneously—even at a dinner party.

Just before his own Passion, Christ asked his Father to help us do just that: “And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. (John 17:11, 14). Jesus knows the Evil One is after us, “prowling about the world seeking the ruin of souls.” Two of his favorite temptations are worry and anxiety.

Why those? Because they get us to take our focus off God and get all wrapped up in what other people think of us instead.

Will I carry off Christmas as well as my mother used to? Will my decorations look as good as my neighbors'? Will my tree be so delightful that everyone who sees it is amazed? Will I get every detail right so that when Christmas is over they will all say, “It was the best Christmas ever!”

Now the problem isn't the tree or the food or the presents. The problem isn't what we're doing, but the way that we do it—preoccupied with other people, full of anxiety, tight little balls of stress. The anxiety is hard to avoid, I know, because they're out there watching us—our neighbors, our parents, our children, our friends—expecting, reacting, judging. Pressure. Worry. Pressure. Fear.

And then there's the pressure that comes from the people we don't even know! It weighs on me every time I look through a magazine (I'm too old for Instagram) and start to worry: Will my table look as good as Martha's—Martha Stewart's, that is? Yes, oppressed by my wants and fears, my cravings and my worries, I lose my Advent stillness and my Christmas joy. No wonder I'm like a dancer falling over in every pirouette.

So what do I do about this? What do we all do about this? Enlist a dancing master, of course! And there is no better one than St. Paul. Here was his instruction to the dance class at Colossae: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if for the Lord, not for men."

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if for the Lord, not for men."

Ok. But, if working for other people opens the jaws of anxiety, how can it not be even worse if I'm working for the Lord of the Universe rather than just trying to please my mother-in-law?

The answer is easy. It's because the Lord of the Universe doesn't need any worldly thing from me or from any of us, for that matter.

"I am God, your God..." he says in Psalm 50,

"Every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.  
I know all the birds of the hills,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.

"If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and its fullness are mine.  
Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls  
or drink the blood of goats?"

Or all that eggnog and Christmas dinner with all the trimmings?

No. God is trying to tell us that he doesn't need any of that sort of thing and that's why he is equally happy with the pa-rum-pum-pum-pum of the little drummer boy as with the gold, frankincense and myrrh of kings. When we work for God, we can let go of the pressure to do any particular thing. We don't have to do any of it—not for him.

What does he want? He wants us to do is empty ourselves of fear—of what the future will bring, of what other people will think or say—and focus on him. To trust him.

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Something very good is coming—something you will treasure in your heart even if you don't completely understand.

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." So what does it matter what other people think?

And the terrified shepherds hear, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” All shall be well and all shall be well and all matter of things shall be well.

“Be not afraid.” It’s the single most common phrase in the Bible—150 different times.

Now with the pressure to do off and hearts empty of fear, all that remains is for us to do our best.

I played my drum for Him,  
I played my best for Him,  
Then He smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum  
Me and my drum.

The best of ourselves is all we have to offer him anyway.

I like to think about myself as that little drummer boy, innocent and unselfconscious, happy to just play my drum for him even if the VIPs from the Orient are listening, too. I used to be that way when I was a little kid. I’ll bet you were, too.

Those were the days, weren’t they? The days before the comparisons, the expectations, the hyper-sensitivity to approval and disapproval. The days before the pressure.

Those days faded from my life more than half a century ago, but there is someone who helps me to remember. Her name is Sylvia and she lives next door. She’s four and she’s a ballerina.

Earlier this year, her mom, Ling, stopped by to say Sylvia’s ballet school was hosting a recital and Sylvia had asked particularly if Alan and I would come and watch her dance. “She wants everyone she loves to watch her,” Ling said.

Come watch me! Come watch me! I thought about how many times I called out those same words when I was young and how many times my parents, and especially my grandparents, did just that. They watched me slide down the sliding board and jump in the deep end of the pool. They watched me at every school play, band performance, Girl Scout parade and graduation. Whenever there was something to see, the people I loved were there watching me do the best I knew how.

So, with pleasure, we went to watch Sylvia. The recital was held at Regina Dominican in Wilmette and the day-long event was divided into 45 minute pods of 12 groups of dancers, each group performing a short dance, one right after the other. In other words, Sylvia and her classmates would take the stage and dance for a whole 90 seconds.

We sat with Sylvia’s whole family in a darkened auditorium, hundreds of cell phones bobbing up and down recording every minute. After several other groups had finished, Sylvia’s class of four-year-old’s was up.

The music started, “heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it’s off to work we go,” and there she was, in her little pink tutu, her hair pulled up and back in a tight classic ballerina bun, holding the hands of her classmates in front and behind her in line, marching, knees up high, in single file out to the center of the stage. The rest of the dance was basically jumping up in down in place and running round in circles.

But Sylvia! Smiling from ear to ear, jumping and twirling in no particular direction, she danced with her whole heart, and didn’t even get distracted when a couple of the other little girls started wandering off the stage in the middle of the dance.

Now who was she dancing for?

She wasn’t performing for judges at an audition. She wasn’t dancing for a grade from her teacher. I don’t think she was deliberately looking for applause. She didn’t seem conscious of other people at all.

I put it to you she was dancing for God. Perhaps not with the kind of awareness and understanding of God you and I as adults have, but God just the same.

St. Irenaeus said: “The glory of a God is a human being fully alive.” On that day, God’s glory was Sylvia.

When the recital was over, she ran to find her mother and father who wrapped her in their arms. “Did you see me? Did you see me?”

“Yes, we did! You were wonderful!” Her dad gave her a bouquet of flowers and she had her picture taken with everyone, face beaming in joy.

Those pictures are now up on Ling’s refrigerator and I think that when God sees any of us dancing like that in the middle of our Advent activities, he takes our picture, too, and puts it on his refrigerator in heaven.

Now, obviously, I’m not four years old anymore. Neither are you. We have an adult’s experience, responsibilities and awareness of the needs and expectations of other people. Our dance will be different—and harder—because we have to find a way to keep our “adulthood” from distracting us, pulling our attention from him, putting our *emphasis* on the wrong *syllable*, so to speak, so that we end up back where we started—working for other people—anxious and worried, all full of stress.

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as if for the Lord, not for men” so says the dancing master, clapping his hands to get my attention.

So this Advent I’m going to do my best to dance for the Lord with my whole heart. To help my core get strong enough to support me through it all, I’ve decided on seven exercises to try. Maybe some of them will help you, too.

First of all, and given he doesn't need me to do everything or even anything in particular, I recognize I have the responsibility and the discretion to choose my dance properly—consistent with the nature and gifts God has given me. I don't have to dance a certain dance because somebody else is or thinks I should.

We've all seen an actor cast in the wrong part. It ruins the movie. And I've heard opera singers try to sing jazz. Ugh. So if my nature makes me suited to the ballet, I need to stay away from break dancing. If I do, it won't be hard at all to do it with my whole heart.

Baking is my ballet. Making 10 dozen cookies for Lessons and Carols is fun and it's a happy time mixing dough, shaping cookies, my oven going all day, listening to Christmas music.

Decorating on the other hand, is my break dance. I'm no good at it and I don't like it, so I don't do it. When people walk into our house and say, "What? No Christmas tree?" I just smile and say, "No, no Christmas tree. Want a cookie?"

So, even if I used to be able to do it, even if everyone else is doing it, even if I think I ought to do it, there are some things I'm going to try to say no to this year and let them go. Some dances are just not for me.

Second, and along those lines, I know full well that there are things I wouldn't ordinarily choose to do that I have to do to please someone I care about. So if I agree to do them, then I will give them my best, even if it's hard and not entirely fun for me. My "yes" will mean "yes" and won't disguise a reluctant and resentful "no." God doesn't want to watch a dance where I mope around and sigh because I'm somewhere I don't really want to be and telegraph it all over the room. So instead I will try to remember I'm doing this thing or attending this event because I love someone and commit to taking my pleasure from that.

So now we've chosen our dances. Now let's consider the audience—the other people watching us even though, of course, we're dancing for God. Sad to say, some audiences have a way of heckling a performer. Have you ever been heckled? I have...by that person who comes to the buffet table and says "Oh, so you decided not to do eggnog this year. Such a shame. But then, it's a lot of work, isn't it." Or, "What a nice new tradition, not to wrap presents anymore, but just put them in those little bags."

I laugh now, but it's not so funny in the moment, not when it's my mother, and the anxiety wells up and I start to wobble. So, number three, this year, I'm going to recognize heckling for what it is—a temptation to anxiety and before it gets the better of me, I'm going to shoo it away and say, "Oh, Mom, that little bag will save you all the work of unwrapping my present so you can see what I got for you faster!" Do you think that will work? At least it will preserve my peace of heart.

And number four, and even harder to do, I am not going to heckle myself. Being a person whose striving for excellence often swerves into perfectionism, I'm easily tempted to criticize myself for falling short of an ideal that exists entirely in my head. No one knows that the gingerbread house I took to the nuns at the convent doesn't look exactly like the one on Martha Stewart's website.



They're all gathered around it exclaiming in delight. I don't need to point out every flaw and destroy their enjoyment in some perverse confession that I've failed to be perfect. I do not need to do the Devil's job for him.

Number five...I don't know what's harder, doing my best and getting heckled or doing my best and having no one notice. As much as I don't want the criticism, I do want the applause. And if I don't get it, the anxiety wells up again. What did I do wrong? What wasn't good enough? And then I start teetering again.

So this Advent I am going to do my best even if no one thanks me, if no one reciprocates, or even notices. I'm going to make my very best meal whether anyone praises it or not. I'm going to send Christmas cards to the people I care about, even if they didn't send one to me last year or the year before. I'm not going to be upset if I put a lot of work into hosting a neighborhood party and I don't get thank you notes, or calls, or texts from my guests. (That's a hard one). If people don't react the way I think they should and I feel a twinge of disappointment, I'm just going to notice it, then let it go. I'm working for God, after all, and as long as I've done my best, he is well pleased.

That brings me to number six...when the heckling gets to me or I start to feel disappointed in myself, or no one praises me, I'm going to try to see these bits of break-through anxiety as blessings in disguise. They reveal the needs and wants that I still need to get beyond. In other words, they show me where my core is still weak and needs some work. So I'm going to keep that prayer we sing in response to Psalm 23 at the tip of my tongue, "Shepherd me, O Lord, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life."

Seventh and last, I'm going to listen to my dancing master when he says: "Dismiss all anxiety from your minds...Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and petition, full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding will stand guard over your hearts and minds." So I'll do what he says. He's the dancing master after all—the one who already knows how to dance far better than I.

So there you have it. This Advent, I'm going to choose my dance and give it my all. I'm going to disregard the heckling, and let go of my hankering after praise. I'm going to listen to St. Paul and pray to God for help. If I can do all of those things, then maybe I will have gone some way toward building up a strong core of peaceful stillness in the midst of all I do—a core I can put it to work throughout the whole year to come. Then maybe, just maybe, I will have started living in the world and not being of the world, a grown up adult woman fully alive, the glory of God.

That's where I'll end today, but before I go, what about Katy? Don't you want to know what finally happened on Christmas Eve?

You'll remember that we last saw Katy standing in the kitchen with steam coming out of her ears like Wile Coyote in a Road Runner cartoon, short of salad dressing, vodka sauce all over her ravioli, staring at 24 Kaiser rolls.

What she did next, though, was something very different than she normally would have done in a situation like this. Rather than radiating her anxiety all over the room, so that everyone knew to keep their distance, she inhaled and prayed, “Shepherd me, O Lord, beyond my wants, beyond my fears from death into life.” She exhaled and found a core of peace and tranquility that let her dance through the rest of her dinner party.

Her sister walked up behind her, holding a glass of wine and said, “Hey, you need anything?” And instead of barking, “No, I’ll deal with the mess these incompetent caterers made all by myself. Go away!” Katy replied, “Want to ream a couple of lemons? I need to make some more salad dressing.” “Sure,” her sister said, “Leave it to me.”

Her cousin came in and peeked under the foil covering the ravioli. “Yummm. Vodka sauce! I love it! Want me to grate some cheese?”

Her sister-in-law wandered over and laughed, “Kaiser rolls! What a hoot! What do you want to do with them? Garlic bread? I’ll chop garlic.”

So, these three women surrounded our peaceful Katy and got to work. The four of them stood in the kitchen, laughing and joking, squeezing lemons, grating cheese and broiling bread, just happy to be together, their joy pulling more people to them as their laughter spread throughout the house.

When Katy told me about the evening a few days later, she described it in one word: “Magical. It was magical—the best Christmas Eve ever. Everyone had such a good time. I had such a good time. All evening, I was happy and at peace. But I am never ordering from that restaurant again!”

That evening Katy chose the better part—and stepped up to the harder part—and once she did, his peace could not be taken from her, because God himself stood guard over her heart and mind.

And so, in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the peace of the Lord be with you all and remain with you forever.

Amen.