

*Holy darkness,
blessed night,
heaven's answer hidden from our sight.
As we await you, O God of silence,
we embrace your holy night.*

Dan Schutte

“Welcome to Christmas at Benet Hill Monastery.” Passing through our purple doors to joining us for vespers of the first Sunday of Advent, our guests step in from winter’s cold to journey with us through the Advent/Christmas Season. Received by a sister and signing the guest book, our guests walk down a long hallway noticing the stained glass windows of our founders and patrons St. Scholastica and St. Benedict, Benedict’s hand raised in blessing. The Ministry Center next, where classes in Contemplative Prayer, Benedictine Spirituality and Scripture are held. Passing the gift shop, guests glimpse the entrance to Our Lady of Peace Chapel where a mosaic of Our Lady of Guadalupe, an image of the pregnant Blessed Mother appearing as a woman indigenous to the Americas symbolizes our continual anticipation of the coming Christ. Around the corner and through a small threshold is Spirit of Wisdom Oratory. Here is where we gather several times a day to hear God’s word, to give praise and to offer our prayer for the world.

Entering the oratory, a small round room, appointed in traditional monastic fashion, we are seated to begin our celebration. The ambo cloth is a deep purple indicating the change of season. Advent is the time when the Church begins a new liturgical year and marks the beginning of our Advent/Christmas Season. Our opening ritual expresses our gratitude as we end this year of hearing the Gospel of Luke and begin to listen to Gospel of Matthew. Vespers begin, a hymn, Psalmody, the gospel, *Magnificat*, prayer for the world and finally we sing *Holy Darkness*.

Each day until the Feast of Baptism of the Lord is a celebration in anticipation of and gratitude for the Christ born anew in each person. There are depictions of women in our oratory windows, women we celebrate for their participation in God’s plan of salvation from the beginning, culminating with Mary. We sing the *O antiphons* starting December 17th through 23rd. The antiphons, based on the names of Jesus can be found in the hymn *O Come O Come Emanuel* which like our prayers is rooted in the ancient traditions of the Church. Advent vespers end each night with the refrain from *Holy Darkness*. The melody lingers in our hearts reminding us that God comes also in darkness and silence.

Christmas morning our festive bells ring out our joy as family and friends, old and new gather for the Eucharistic liturgy. Amidst vibrant reds and crisp white linen, evergreen branches decorate the monastery. This is the time of fulfillment of God’s promise of new life in unexpected ways. Our Christmas tree is adorned with flowers preserved from this past year’s celebrations. New Years Eve we pray our Taize Prayer for Peace with all who wish to join us. Throughout the rest of the season we sing carols and listen again to the stories of Jesus’ early life.

Our prayer forms the rhythm of our monastic life creating an awareness of God’s loving presence in the world. For us and those who join us, Advent/Christmas is a special journey. All are welcome to join us as we accept the challenges of the incarnate Christ born anew.