

A DEVOTIONAL THROUGH ADVENT'S PROMISES

THE
WEARY
WORLD
Rejoices

from Everything
Happens with
Kate Bowler



An Introduction to *Advent*

Have you been looking at the jaw-dropping new images that are coming in from the James Webb Space Telescope? These photos of deep space are wild and surreal. Pillars of gas and dust. Clouds of yellows, oranges and blues that capture the mystery and dazzling beauty of the universe. You are immediately struck by the sense that there is so much out there, but it's not here. *Not yet anyway.*

The days leading up to Christmas (we call this season Advent) is kind of like that. It's a promise that is coming, as surely and steadily as light traveling from a distant star. It is the promise of a return—a restoration of all things to their true being, a goodness

which was conceived from the beginning of time, a realized hope we've been longing for.

For the “days are coming,” say the prophets of old. “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise.” The promise of truth, compassion, restoration, and justice.

These four promises are how we will orient this daily devotional guide. They will serve as our guiding themes—pulling us toward a future that we can only glimpse. But it is a future that will turn everything upside-down (or maybe right-side up). Everything wrong will be made right; everything bad will be made good; everything empty and devoid of love will be filled.

The season of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar, and it's about 22-28 days depending on the year. And one of my favorite things about this time of preparation for Christmas is the tone. We don't cruise into Christmas with triumph and a rah-rah certainty that all is well. We begin by waiting—tired waiting. *A feeling I know you know too well.* Waiting for the test results. Waiting for the phone call. Waiting for your kid to come back or the job offer to come through. Waiting for your parents to get better or finally apologize. Waiting for the family you

longed for or that financial relief you desperately need. Waiting for prayers to be answered or community to be found. We are *very* familiar with waiting.

But, this Advent, we don't wait in vain. Christmas brings us right to the moment of the birth of Jesus—our joy realized, first in a tiny baby born and laid down in a hay stall in a backwater town. A Savior who will someday make all things right. This Advent, may we squint at the light that is afar and say, “Come, Lord Jesus! We're tired of waiting.”

WHAT YOU NEED TO GET STARTED:

—20 minutes each day leading up to Christmas (In 2025, Advent begins on Sunday, November 30.)

OPTIONAL: On each Sunday of Advent, we will invite you to light a candle. You are welcome to use a traditional Advent wreath (there are lovely options on Etsy) or make a makeshift one yourself using items from around your house and yard or from the local craft store. They usually include five candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white in the center), surrounded by some sort of greenery (pine boughs, holly, or plastic garland works great).

HOW TO USE THIS DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE:

Go Solo: We've designed each day to take around 20 minutes. This includes reading the assigned scripture and a short devotional, reflecting on questions to think or journal about, responding thoughtfully, and praying to close. If you have extra time, there are opportunities to dive deeper into our themes and topics by listening to suggested podcast episodes, participating in some hands-on activities, watching some bonus videos, and reflecting on the songs from our Advent playlist. Zero pressure to complete everything. Just pick the option that suits whatever day you're having.

With Family and Friends: Like most things, Advent is better practiced together. We have created each Sunday's entry as an opportunity to practice Advent with others. This can be with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or book club—in person or on zoom. In that day's entry, you will be prompted to light an Advent candle, read a scripture aloud, reflect on a short devotional, and discuss questions together.

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Acknowledgments:

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WEEK 01

the promise of *truth*

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30 TO SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6

*Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;
such a truth as ends all strife;
such a life as killeth death.*

*Come, my Light,
my Feast, my Strength:
such a light as shows a feast;
such a feast as mends in length;*

*such a strength as makes a guest.
Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
such a joy as none can move:
such a love as none can part;
such a heart as joys in love.*

—“COME, MY WAY,
MY TRUTH, MY LIFE”
BY GEORGE HERBERT (1633)

The Days are Coming

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.’”

—JEREMIAH 33:14-16 (NIV)

Biblical prophets are my favorite because they never shy away from hard truths. They speak plainly about the problems in the world. They weep and mourn for the brokenness, the pain, and the suffering that they witness—especially a guy named Jeremiah (he wasn’t called the weeping prophet for nothing!). Jeremiah noticed the ways that the world was not as it would be, *not as it should be*. He glimpsed the world through tears. Yet he also saw something sacred shining through. Long before the birth of Christ, Jeremiah predicted his coming, and he told everyone: “The days are coming...they are coming,” when someone will come whose very name means truth and justice and love and compassion and peace and safety and righteousness to make all things right (a paraphrase).

Fast forward over 500 years, and enter a baby born to usher in a new creation, a new hope, a new truth—a

truth that the world would one day be restored. This is the very promise of God that began in creation and is now being fulfilled in the person of Jesus. And perhaps this is what the season of Advent invites us to bear witness to.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t tell the whole truth about what we are experiencing in the here and now. It takes courage to wrap our minds around the inconvenient truths, the difficult truths, the complicated and seemingly contradictory truths. God has made us for truth-telling, to have eyes that glimpse through tears at the already-and-not-yet that we live in. And at the same time, these same eyes are trained on Jesus, who embodies the compassion, restoration, and justice we long for. So this Advent, may we have the eyes to look long and see this promise of truth coming toward us once again. Let’s meet it with joy, together.

PRACTICE ADVENT TOGETHER

The Advent wreath began in 1839 in a shelter for orphans and neglected children. Each night of Advent, a German pastor named Johann Hinrich Wichern gathered the kids around him to light a candle, tell them a story, and pray. Imagine their excitement as the candle pushed back the darkness more and more, one night at a time. Any child called John or Joan would be first to help light a candle as they heard about John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus. Visitors who came to the orphanage loved the wheel-shaped chandelier, and so the custom spread as churches and families adopted it, though the number of candles were eventually reduced to 4 for each Sunday of Advent, and 1 on Christmas Day.

For the first night of Advent, gather your family or friends over for dinner or FaceTime your parents or grandkids. Grab a match, dim the lights, and sit around your Advent wreath. Light the first purple candle and take a moment to look around at the faces in the candlelight. (You can play an Advent song from our [Advent playlist](#) to begin. Or sing “This Little Light of Mine.”)



DISCUSS

**Note: If you have young children or want to lean into your creative side, give each person paper and colorful crayons, markers, or colored pencils. Ask them to start drawing pictures of Christmas lights as you start the discussion.*

1. Christmas is the season of light and of lights. Many people light-up the long winter nights with lights on their trees or homes, even blow-up characters and

dinosaurs. There are lights everywhere you look. Share your favorite memory of going to see Christmas lights, or lighting up your Christmas tree, or dreams you have of decorating your house with lights one day. What are your favorite kinds of Christmas lights?

2. John 1:5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (NIV). How does Jesus, as the light, reveal what is true about the world as it is now?

3. Jeremiah speaks about how the “days are coming” when the world will look different, a promised future we can only glimpse. What are your greatest hopes for the world? For your community? For your family?

RESPOND

The promise of Advent is that there is a light coming who overcomes the darkness. One night this week (perhaps tonight!), take time to notice the lights of Christmas, or look up at the stars and the moon. Get curious about the contrast. How do the lights make you feel as you stand in the night? What does this light reveal to you about Jesus as the light shining in darkness (John 1:5)?



“It takes courage to wrap our minds around the inconvenient truths, the difficult truths, the complicated and seemingly contradictory truths.”

A Blessing for Beginning Again in Advent

God, could this be the year when we see it?
The goodness that is coming,
like starlight from a distant time?

Could this be the Advent when we sense it?
That the springtime of the soul
will one day last forever?

Could this be the Advent when we notice
the inbreaking of your coming promises?
Promises full of blessing:
of truth so clear, so bright
that every shadowy lie must flee away.
Of compassion so deep, so strong
that everyone is encircled in its embrace.

Of restoration so complete, so beautiful
that there is gladness everywhere.
And of justice so satisfying and so right,
that all will be well.

May this Advent be the new beginning,
as we learn to live by the light
of your coming promises.
Glimpsing the world through tears,
while also seeing something
sacred shining through too.
Our Truth. Our Light.
Our Promise incarnate.
Amen.

Building a House on the Rock

“Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the torrents raged, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because its foundation was on the rock.”

—MATTHEW 7:24-25 (BSB)

There are some truths that we need to stand on. These are the truths that help carry us through the most unthinkable of moments, truths that we can find ourselves wrapped inside of and comforted by. Truths that are wider and deeper than the trite platitudes that we here at Everything Happens love to debunk. (What doesn't kill you doesn't always make you stronger, Aileen!) When our lives are coming undone, we no longer have the patience for feeble attempts to repair or want to gloss over the pain that we are experiencing. There are often no words that

can fill the aching gap. The fix that is needed is a solid one, a fulsome one that restores and brings peace. I think that must be what Jesus meant when he said to build your house on the rock. When the storms inevitably come (notice he doesn't say “if” or “in case of emergencies”), we need something firmer to stand upon.

By coming to earth, Jesus came as our firm foundation—one of love, truth, compassion, and long-faithfulness—not empty niceties. It is here where we can find rest from the storm and truths we can stand on.

REFLECT

1. Think back to your stormiest of seasons. What false truths did you have to let go of? What did you discover to be true about yourself even then? About God?
2. Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of the promises of God. The promise that God loves and cares for us enough to come to earth to be with us. Jesus came not only to sit with us through the storms, but to bring peace. Imagine Jesus sitting with you today. What words of comfort, hope, and peace does Jesus' presence offer you?



RESPOND

Grab a piece of paper and start a list. Write down what is true about God, about you, about your community, and about the world. Revisit this list in a couple of days and make sure what you listed is still true. This could be helpful to return to during the storms of life—some truths you can stand on.

TRUTHS
ABOUT GOD

TRUTHS
ABOUT ME

TRUTHS ABOUT
MY COMMUNITY

TRUTHS ABOUT
THE WORLD

A Blessing for Telling the Truth

Blessed are you,
pulling on courage like a warm coat,
when you are in the
first cold blasts of a storm.

Blessed are you,
finding shelter in telling the truth about
what has come.
Beginning to name your feelings and
letting them flow.
Telling the truth about where you are.
Not from where you think you should be,
or would like to be,
but from the center of the truth
as you know it.

*Because this is precisely the place
where God will meet you.*

Blessed are you,
beginning to have an inkling
that what once grounded you
is still there at the heart of things.
Those deeper, wider truths are your place
to stand.
That love wins,
and that kindness will prevail.
And that at your core,
you are not only lovable,
but deeply, deeply loved.

And in the meantime, blessed are you
noticing the few small and useful things
that can be done,
even now, to make it a little better for
somebody.

Maybe even you.



GOING DEEPER

When our lives come undone, perhaps through grief or divorce or addiction, we need truths we can stand upon. The Reverend Tom Long speaks with Kate about how to tell the truth in the hardest moments. Listen to their full conversation on [“Number Our Days”](#) (42 min).

You Are a Wonder

“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’”

—JOHN 18:37 (NRSV)

Do you sometimes feel like you’re swimming in the seas of ambiguity and contradiction? One minute the world makes sense and I know who I am and what I’m good at, and the next I’m questioning myself, my worth, my gifts. *Is my problem or pain too much? Did I screw everything up? Am I a good enough parent, friend, partner, coworker? Should I have this figured out by now?* Perhaps you have similar questions spinning around your mind.

I am beginning to think this is part of what it means to be human. One minute we are messy and stingy and irritable, but the next we can be absolutely radiant with beauty and wonder and generosity. We’re all of these things, yet sometimes it’s in the mirror of another’s perception that we can see the truth.

My friend, writer Kelly Corrigan, describes this work through the life of her dad (whom she affectionately calls “Greenie”). Greenie acted as a mirror to her friends growing up. He would say to them, “You are truly a wonder!” “Wow, you’re really amazing!” “You are the discovery of a lifetime!” Greenie died a few years ago, but Kelly’s friends still remember his words of encouragement with gratitude.

When we are overwhelmed with brokenness or sorrow, we need people to remind us that we are still good, and there is goodness in the world. That we can be forgiven. That it isn’t too late. That we are loved, loved, loved—not for what we do but for who we are. This act of mirroring reflects back to us the truth that we are *becoming*. We are still being made. *In fact, creating and restoring is God’s specialty.*

REFLECT

1. Who in your life acts as a mirror, reflecting the truth of your beauty and wonder back to you? How does being in their presence make you feel?

2. Practice seeing other people with awe and wonder today. For whom can you be a mirror?

RESPOND

In the busyness of our lives, we often forget that Jesus came to earth to remind us of our belovedness and restore us to wholeness. Make time today to soak up this truth like basking in the sunshine.

A Blessing for What's True about You

When God thought you up, it was a good day,
a lovely dream realized in God's imagination,
a celebration from before you were born.
You were made out of God's overflowing love,
in who you were, and are, and would become.
God saw it all,
from way before the beginning, 'til way past the end.
And saw that it was good.

This one, God said, this one I love.
I delight in the beauty, and the promise,
the wonder and the glory that is this one
whom I have made.

And my gaze is ever upon them,
constant, and warm like the sun at golden hour,
gentle as starlight,
transforming and continuing,
calling forth all the growing, all the becoming
that is to be done.

Remember this truth:
You were made
by love, for love, to love.



GOING DEEPER

Poet and artist Morgan Harper Nichols creates beauty out of the realities of our complicated truths. What she has learned from hearing people's stories is that the truth may not be as certain as we hope. Learn more about Morgan's work in this conversation between her and Kate, "[Blessed are the Mirrors](#)." (This podcast is so rich you won't regret listening to the whole thing, but if you don't have time watch this 3 minute clip.)



Learn more about Kelly Corrigan's dad Greenie. Listen to this clip of Kate and Kelly discussing Greenie's great gift in "[Here's to the Happies](#)" (4 minute clip). You can also read more about Kelly's amazing dad in her book, *The Middle Place*.

*"You are truly
a wonder!"*



For When You Are Not Ready

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

—JOHN 14:6 (NRSVA)

Do you ever feel panic when you realize that Christmas is just weeks away? (And perhaps I have just set off that tiny alarm. Whoops!) You haven't figured out the who, what, when, or where of the season. You haven't created a menu or shopping list. You haven't figured out what time and where the family is gathering, or who is coming or not. You haven't prepared yourself for the annual Christmas party or family dinner and all the drama that goes with it. Advent can feel so overwhelming because all of the festive activities carry the weight and the baggage of the whole year. That divorce. That grief. That unmet expectation. That never-uttered apology. Or maybe you are simply too sick, too tired, or too sad and are having a hard time forcing yourself to spread

any cheer. The Christmas season can be a great revealer. Revealing our hopes and expectations... and revealing the more-likely, less-pretty reality of life as it *actually* is.

This can be difficult to face. Writer Dani Shapiro describes it as “looking straight at the sun... sometimes we can only stand small glimpses at a time.” Maybe that is a reason Jesus came to us as an infant—we could only handle a little bit of the truth at a time. Whether you are trying to be more honest with yourself or with others, with your kids, or with your community, perhaps Jesus might show you how to take baby steps today without carrying the heavy burden of pretending.

REFLECT

1. Are you ready for Christmas (...and I am not talking about buying presents)? What is weighing on your heart? What realities (even the unfixable ones) do you need to acknowledge—maybe even start to embrace?
2. Holidays can be a perfect storm of emotions and expectations and fights that start with “YOU-ALWAYS!” What have you been pushing down that needs to bubble to the surface (even if it isn’t pretty)? As you reflect, remember to be gentle with yourself.

RESPOND

Who do you trust to hold this with you? Someone who will not try to fix it, but who is willing to sit with you or rejoice with you? What steps can you take today to reach out for support?



A Blessing For When the Promises Seem Too Far Away

God, draw me close,
so my quietest thoughts feel safe.
I want to tell you everything.
Everything that is true.
Everything that is impossible.

May I hear your promises
like an echo from another life,
removed from how precarious
and lonely this one can be.
I will wait, and I will listen,
until quietly I hear you say:
Child, now is the time
for small and gentle things.

Keep everything that is harsh far far away.
For you are worth protecting.
Do just the simplest things
that speak life.

You're free to reach
for the choice fruit,
sip from the best cup.
Exercise. Floss. Go for a walk,
and then call it a day.

And when the night is past
and the morning has come,
there is strength enough to say,
"God, I'm holding out for your
good promises,
because I love them."

I will watch and wait
stubbornly this Advent,
and push back the boundaries.
I will make a little Christmas, right here,
one that's truer than true.
(Is there a card for that?)



GOING DEEPER

Listen as Kate speaks with writer Dani Shapiro about uncovering life-altering and long-hidden family secrets, and what to do when the truth is complicated in "[Family Secrets](#)" (40 minutes).

Joy to the World

Psalm 98 bursts with joy, calling for shouts and song and blaring instruments all celebrating together that God has come. Even the mountains and rivers and seas join in the new song that extols the coming of justice and rescue. A beloved Christmas carol, “Joy to the World” bases its lyrics on this psalm. Isaac Watts wrote this poem in 1719 as an answer to a challenge. He had been complaining to his father that singing the psalms in church didn’t reflect the joy of what Christians knew about Jesus, so his father challenged his son to do something about it. *And he did.* Watts published a set of poems based on the psalms. His poem was set to music by the German-British composer, George Fredrick Handel, in the familiar tune we still sing today.

Watts’ words burst with confidence, because, as the final verse says of this new King, “he rules the world with truth and grace.” This is what Advent looks toward with excitement—the promise that the world will be restored and everyone in it with God’s truth and grace at the helm. Now *that’s* something to look forward to.

“Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”

—PSALM 98:7-9 (NIV)

REFLECT

1. Think of young Isaac Watts writing poems in response to his father’s challenge. In essence, his dad told him, “Well, if you don’t like church, improve it!” How would you respond to Papa Watts’ challenge? Can you think of a way to make your experience of church or community or Advent more meaningful? What’s stopping you?

2. While Advent acknowledges the weary hearts who have long-awaited for their Savior, Advent also embodies a kind of excited anticipation. The kind felt by kids (or adults!) on Christmas morning eager to peek under the tree. Which of those realities feels more true to you today? How can you make room for both this season?

RESPOND

Advent is the season of looking for signs of good things to come. Take time today to do some noticing. Let yourself hum “Joy to the World” when you see the first lovely bit of hope.



A Blessing for Opening to Grace and Truth

Jesus, bless the hearts we have,
for we are troubled by many things.
Hearts that are hard like flint,
or melting like wax at the way things are in the world.
Bless these troubled, flinty, melty hearts.
We open them to you.

Jesus, there's freedom in this,
in realizing that you are there
at the very center of things.
Holding our trouble and our fears
and also our joy and excitement.

You are there,
hands cupped around our contradictions.
You are the home we always wanted.

For your truth is unfailingly gracious,
and your grace is unfailingly true.
Come, Lord Jesus.

GOING DEEPER



Listen to Kate speak with actor Stanley Tucci about his love for gathering people around the table—and what better time than Christmas for thinking about connecting with others this way. Watch this clip from their conversation, “[Simple Pleasures. Small Joys](#)” (38 minutes).

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was one of the most prolific hymn writers in the English language. As a nonconformist (which is to say, non-Anglican Protestant) pastor and teacher, he promoted the idea of using new poetry, not just Biblical psalms, as texts for hymns. Among the 750 songs credited to him are “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” “Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun,” and, that Christmas favorite, “Joy to the World,” based on Psalm 98.



Waiting with Uncertainty

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

—JOHN 16:12-13 (NRSVA)

Waiting for answers, waiting for clarity, waiting to understand when we are suffering is the worst. And yet in these intimate words of Jesus, we get the hint that one day we'll know.

But when?

When will the Spirit of truth tell us what to make of it all? Because we're still here, amid the uncertainty, amid the not knowing. We are here struggling with doubt and fear of what this world is coming to, what our lives will be like, what the future holds for our loved ones. Waiting for our cure. Waiting for the job.

Waiting for things to feel easier. But perhaps all of this waiting is teaching us something about Advent.

There's a powerful story that I often return to when I'm thinking about the uneasiness of waiting. It's grounded in the beliefs and actions of a World War II-era German theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. After his plot failed to overthrow Hitler, he wrote these powerful words from prison: *“Not all can wait—certainly not those who are satisfied, contented, and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world*

of the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”²

We can experience a terrible sense of unease when we wait. And we are not alone in that feeling. The unwed Mary didn’t know what was going to happen when she got pregnant. Joseph didn’t know what would happen when he accepted Mary. The wisemen did not know what they would find at the end of their journey, disobeying Herod. So perhaps we keep good company with all those who are learning to wait with hope.

REFLECT

1. Re-read Bonhoeffer’s quote from today’s entry. What part stands out the most? Why is it so compelling to you today?
2. The fruits of the Spirit are present whenever you experience “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV). How is the Spirit at work in your world today?

RESPOND

Waiting and uncertainty are the worst. Whether you are waiting on test results, or waiting to hear from a loved one, waiting to find that perfect job, waiting to feel a break in the long list of absurd things that have happened, or simply waiting for the sun to shine again, we are all waiting on something. How can you be vulnerable and share your time in the waiting room with someone else this week? How can you share in the work of the Holy Spirit by bringing love, compassion, or kindness to others who wait too?

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christmas Sermons*. Ed. Edwin Robertson. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). 21.

A Blessing for When We Don't Know What's Ahead

Blessed are you
who don't have all the right answers.
You who realize that
I don't know the best response
and posture for now,
who lean in unafraid to learn and change
and be wrong along the way.

Blessed are you
who are being stretched
and pressed and pulled
by the uncertainty that surrounds us.
You who are deciding to not stay the same
because we are not who we were.
Things have changed.
We have lost things we can't get back
and need to learn new ways
to live here now.

Blessed are you who have realized
that community really does
help us see the truth clearer,
even if your chin has to be turned gently
(or forcefully) toward it.
Being fragile in the midst of a world of
hammers takes courage.
It takes courage to live here, to be wrong.
Here to learn something new,
to choose humility and kindness
and one another
over being right.

So here's to us, dear ones,
the people who don't have it together,
but who are done pretending to,
it's better this way.
Curious, hopeful, courageous,
and becoming.³

3. Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For When You Need a Second to Think It Over" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 94.

GOING DEEPER



How do we live amid all of this uncertainty? Well, psychologist and bestselling author Adam Grant believes we may have to do some re-thinking. He talks with Kate about the courage it takes to think again about things that we once felt so certain about in “[Leaning Into Uncertainty](#)” (34 minutes)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, and Nazis took control of the official Protestant Church, Bonhoeffer opposed its antisemitism. When World War II broke out, he was working in the USA. Bonhoeffer chose to return to Germany, so that he could be there to help rebuild the church after the war. He worked for German military intelligence, but he secretly helped Jews escape Germany and aided the anti-Nazi resistance. He was arrested in 1943, but he continued to write on Christian topics—these were smuggled out of jail and published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Many of Bonhoeffer’s writings on the Christmas season emerged from this dark period. The helplessness of his plight can be likened to that of a Christian during Advent—waiting for good news and our redemption.



Leave the Rest to God

“Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.”

—PSALM 25:5 (NIV)

The Archbishop of Canterbury (the head of the Church of England) Justin Welby was speaking about all that overwhelms a person's work in the world. He had just visited a refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the Ebola crisis, where people were unable to get food or medical help because of militia fighting. Some had been rescued, but 12,000 had been left behind because they were too sick to be moved. All he could do was comfort one person at a time. In the face of such overwhelming suffering, Justin lamented to his co-worker that he could do so little and asked, “What do you do? How do you cope with the weight of all this?” His friend replied, “Do what you can. Leave the rest to God.”

“Your job is to do what you can with the resources God has given you,” Justin explained. “And if that's very little indeed, it's very little indeed.” When he came to the edges of what is possible, he turned to

the psalms of lament and protest as a way of handing all that cannot be solved by one person over to God.

God is in the process of redeeming the whole world. And as we wait, our prayers might sound something like this: *God, I'm not sure what is happening, or why it's taking so long, or how I can make any difference. Show me what is mine to do. And hurry up on all the rest.* To be able to pray this way is to discover a kind of mental, physical, and emotional settling within ourselves. It's a balance-point where we realize what is ours to be done with human-sized effort. And we stay hopeful about what God is doing even if we can't see it yet.

REFLECT

1. Think about all the things you are passionate about or worried about happening in your life or in the world right now. Write them down on a piece of paper. Take a second to pray over this list. Place a checkmark next to the problems, situations, and worries on this list that are out of your control. Those are the things you can give to God, for now (one day God might show you a way that you can help).

2. Think about the things that keep you up worrying at night or that weigh on your heart. On a scale of 1-10, how hard is it for you to trust God with the redemption of the world?

RESPOND

Take a minute to reflect on something you did not check off your list. How can you make a difference or do something about it today (even if it is a human-sized difference)? How can you offer God's love, grace, and compassion to make these problems a little bit better, even just for today? Let it be your goal to "Do what you can. Leave the rest to God."

*"Do what you can.
Leave the rest to God."*



A Blessing for Our Restless Hearts

God, we bless the starlight that is Advent,
the goodness that is coming, but is not-yet.
We bless the longing that we feel
here in the in-between.
Bless the stirrings, the restlessness
because so much is imperfectable, unfinishable.
We bless our unknowing,

our agreeing to let the world be the world.
We bless the steadiness
of your gaze upon us
for you see us as we are,
and as we were always meant to be.
You are the mirror held before us,
the love by which we see.



GOING DEEPER

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, shares that we can all do small acts of love, and it is okay when we get angry that it doesn't feel like enough. Watch this clip to hear the whole story of his visit to the refugee camp from the conversation, "[Suspicious of Joy](#)" (9 minutes).

WEEK 02

the promise of *compassion*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7 TO SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13

*You came down from the stars,
O divine King,
And appear in a cavern in cold and ice.
O my divine Child, I see you trembling here!
How much it cost you to have loved me!*

*You, the Creator of the world,
are lacking clothing and fire,*

*O my Lord, dear little one,
How much more this poverty
makes me love you,
Since it is love that has made you poor.⁴*

—ITALIAN CAROL, “TU SCENDI
DALLE STELLE”

4. Alphonsus Liguori. “Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle.” n.p. 1732.

Not What We Had Planned

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

—LUKE 1:68-79 (NRSVUE)

Zechariah and Elizabeth thought they were well past the age of childbearing, but now the angel Gabriel announces they will have a baby. What a scandal. What a miracle. Not to mention, Elizabeth's unmarried cousin Mary is unexpectedly pregnant too. Imagine Elizabeth and Mary's shared joy as they place their hands on each other's growing bellies, delighting in the surprise and wonder of what God was up to. These were not the plans they had antici-

pated for their lives. But here God comes to fulfill a promise not just for them, but for the whole world, “because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us” (Luke 1:78)

There is a tender little Italian Christmas song that celebrates this perfectly, *Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle*, written in 1744 by Saint Alphonso Liguori. With childlike simplicity it sings to the baby Jesus:

*You came down from the stars,
 O King of heaven,
 to a cave in the cold and frost.
 O divine baby I see you trembling here.
 Ah how much it costs you to love us like this.
 You who are creator of all the world.⁵
 (translation).*

What an opportunity we have during this season to sit in wonder and delight at what God has done and is still doing. The coming of Jesus is a fulfillment of a promise that the hungry will be fed, the hurting and suffering will find comfort and compassion, and

justice will reign. The mighty reversal of the world has just begun, and during Advent, we are reminded to look for these promises being fulfilled, even if we only catch a glimpse.

Wherever you are in the world, whether you are looking up at the Big Dipper or at the Southern Cross or at the moon sticking around during the daytime, let's be together in this pause. Let's look long, and let the stars speak to us of the wonder that is coming. The beauty that will be. The promises that are still to come—promises that might look entirely unlike anything we might have planned.

PRACTICE ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime some of the kids in your life. Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and light two of the purple candles.

5. "From Starry Skies Descending." English translation of "Tu Scendi Dalle Stella." Alphonsus Liguori. 1732. n.p.

REFLECT

1. When was the last time you felt joy and excitement that made you leap for joy?

2. Where are you struggling this Advent season? (Be willing to listen and affirm someone's struggle without trying to fix it or point out the good in it. Just say, "That makes sense to me; that would be hard" or "I am so sorry.")

3. What do you hope the world will look like one day?

RESPOND

How can you bring joy and hope to the world this week? Can you share kindness with a stranger? Perhaps buy someone coffee, learn their name, and listen to their story? Can you take the time to go shopping and donate gifts to someone in need, maybe find a local non-profit that is sharing hope this season?

A Blessing for Open Arms

Blessed are you with open arms
to welcome God this Advent,
willing to invite its promises into the center of your
longing.

Blessed are you,
even now in the waiting.
Open to receiving what is beautiful
though clothed in such precarity.

Blessed are you,
agreeing to stand still long enough
to let your eyes adjust to the darkness
until the starlight begins to appear,
the dawning of God's promises.
In that gentle light, find a corner of your heart
where hope can stay protected.
A place from which we can nurture a little gratitude,
a little compassion, enough to go around.
Some for God and some for yourself.
And some for the next unsuspecting soul
that wanders into your light.

On Your Team, Always

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

—PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8 (NRSVA)

Jesus is the picture of God's love. In becoming human, he “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG). Jesus is God-with-us so he could be God's compassion *for us*, in word and deed. When he saw someone suffering, he wept with them (John 11:33) and came to their aid (Mark 10:51). He talked with the excluded and marginalized (John 4:7) and ate with the outcasts (Matthew 9:10). There was no one whose illness or status rendered them unapproachable or untouchable (Matthew 8:3). This is the kind of radical compassion that says, I am not just helping you. *I am with you.*

The American writer Annie Dillard writes, “So once in Israel, love came to us incarnate and stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.”⁶ Maybe we were afraid because we have never been properly introduced to this kind of perfect love. We don't feel ready to be fully seen and fully known. But what if deep down, this is what we really want? To be loved in this deep and enduring and compassionate way, and to love that way in return.

REFLECT

It is often said that in order to understand someone you need to walk a mile in their shoes. Jesus came to walk in our shoes, learning to walk just like we do, feeling the same feelings, and living with the same beauty, suffering, and loss as us. How does thinking about Jesus as person-with-us resonate with you today?

6. Annie Dillard. *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). 141.

RESPOND

Write a letter to God. You are welcome to use this template or start with a blank sheet of paper.

Dear God,

You came down to earth, humbling yourself to think of me. Stepping out of the safe space of heaven to be present to me. To understand how I feel.

Here is how I am feeling today:

God, you have been there. You have felt these same feelings. In this moment, I want to hand my fears and doubts over to you:

And while what I'm going through can make me feel lonely, I know I am not alone. For you are with me. And others have walked this path before too. Here is my prayer to find others who might support me, or who I may support, as we walk this together:

Thank you for always being on my team. For the compassion you show me in the midst of my struggle.

Amen.

A Blessing for Where Compassion Begins

Blessed are you Jesus,
at home in heights of heaven
where love is felt in every moment,
where all is well.

That's the place
where you began to change the world.
Not with a program or a system,
but with the absolute refusal
to let the unloved and the unlovely stay that way.
Your mind was made up, the decision made
to draw the circle larger
and loop us all in.

Blessed are you, Jesus,
who made us insiders
by the power of your
inexhaustible compassion
that loved us into belonging,
and holds us there in community with you.

Somebody fought for us, and it was you.
Somebody showed up for us,
and it was you.
Somebody gave everything for us,
and it was you.
Somebody won, and it was all for us.

GOING DEEPER

Annie Dillard is an American author who has won so many honors and awards that it is hard to capture just how highly she is regarded in the literary world. If you are new to Annie's work, I would recommend picking up a copy of *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*.

Good, Better, Best

“Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

—MATTHEW 22:37-40 (NLT)

Good. Better. Best. That is the scale upon which our culture loves to weigh ourselves. Even though God had already declared us good in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1:31), we couldn’t stop there. We had to have more, get more, do more, be more. Until one day, perhaps due to illness or grief or mental anguish or exhaustion or maybe something entirely out of our control, we stop.

When our striving and trying and hustling stops, what remains?

Perhaps the truth is that we have forgotten (or maybe never realized) that we were first created in goodness. We never had to earn or push for God’s love. For you are a child of God. Your goodness has always been obvious to God. Jesus recognizes that pain and suffering are not the whole story. He sees our goodness right alongside whatever addictions or diagnoses or family drama we struggle with. So let’s take ourselves off the hook for being good, better, best and settle for good enough, shall we?

REFLECT

1. Take a minute to check you in with yourself. What standards or expectations are you holding yourself to this season? What standards or expectations are you holding others to?

2. Embracing your goodness is not about your ego. This is a much deeper and holy connection. Goodness is about being whole, accepting limitations without judgment, and seeing the holy inside of you. You are capable of kindness, gentleness, generosity, joy, mercy, and love. What parts of this feel easy to grasp? What parts feel difficult to grasp?

RESPOND

As you go throughout this week, whenever you are feeling “not enough” or “pushing yourself too hard,” take a second and be gentle with yourself instead. Remind yourself of the goodness that is inside of you and smile with relief because you, my dear, are good enough.

*“You, my dear, are
good enough.”*



A Blessing to Feel More Love

I am going to put them down:
every insecurity and ugly belief I have
about my body, my abilities, my personality.

They won't teach me anything
(at least not now).

Let me accept other people's love
like a wrapped present.

For me?

That's so thoughtful.

It's exactly what I wanted.

Lord, I've spent so much time
imagining my worst qualities
that it's difficult to imagine that you
numbered the hairs on my head,
painted my eyes this color,

and soften at the sound of my voice.

You are not the bathroom scale
or a work evaluation.

You are not an ex-partner or ex-friend.

You know the very best of me.

You are my cheerleader and champion,
my memory keeper and favorite friend.

Flood me with love, love, love.

Because of who I am, who I've become
and who you made me.

The world is loud, God.

Only you can convince me
of how embarrassingly loveable I can be.

Quiet the shame and doubt and self-hatred.

I'm ready to feel love again.⁷

7. Kate Bowler. "To Feel More Love" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 109.



GOING DEEPER

Author Malcom Gladwell debated with Kate on whether or not people are capable of change. What do you think? Reflect on your answer while you listen to their conversation, "[Can People Change?](#)" (38 minutes).

Love that Changes the World

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13 (NIV)

Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone was born in central Italy in 1181. His father nicknamed him Francesco (“Frenchy”). Frenchy lived the carefree life of a rich man’s son. That is, until he had a life changing experience that led him to give up everything. As the story goes, he was walking in a forest outside of Assisi and came across people who suffered from leprosy. They were made to live outside of the city due to their contagious disease. At first he was afraid. But he was so moved by God’s compassion and love that he went and hugged the leper. In doing so, he felt that embracing those who are suffering is to embrace Jesus himself.

Frenchy would go on to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by denying himself and embracing everyone (including animals) with love and compassion. He embraced a life of poverty, giving everything he had to those in need. His love and compassion would translate into changing the lives not for just one leper, but for many generations of people. He would become known to the world as St. Francis of Assisi. Generations of people would go on to be compelled by his teachings, spreading love and compassion to a weary world.

REFLECT

1. When have you experienced or witnessed acts of compassion this week?

2. Frenchy was afraid of the stigmatized people. What has kept you from sharing love or compassion with others?

RESPOND

Compassion takes not only courage but also time. God might be calling you toward acts of costly compassion in the coming weeks. Are you ready to answer that call? Start praying right now about how you might share more love with the world. Be honest with God about what might hold you back.

The Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make us instruments of your peace:

where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.⁸

8. A Prayer attributed to St. Francis" in *The Book of Common Prayer*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979). 833.

GOING DEEPER

In 1223, in the town of Greccio, Francis set up the earliest living nativity scene. It had been customary for centuries for churches to set up a model of a crib near the altar during the Christmas season, but Francis was the first to use real animals. The living Nativity scene is a long-enduring tradition that is still carried out 800 years later. Another Christmastide example set by Francis is the custom of giving animals a special feeding on December 25. He begged farmers to give their livestock extra food at Christmas in memory of the ox and donkey between whom the baby lay. The Franciscan brotherhood is also responsible for the idea of Christmas carols. Before the 1200s, most songs celebrating Advent and the Nativity were solemn, theologically-dense hymns in Latin, but members of the order took popular tunes—often dance music—and wrote lyrics in the local language.



Are you interested in learning more about how to cultivate a culture of empathy in your own life and in others? Our team has put together [this page of resources](#) for you on practicing empathy.



The Answer to the Question

“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

—1 PETER 3:8-9 (NIV)

Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries wouldn't like it very much if I called him a living saint (so I'll just keep it between you and me). He thinks that makes the work he does in the world seem too unattainable for the rest of us to participate in. He works among gang members in Los Angeles to reconnect them to wholeness through the training, employment, and multiple supports that his world-wide rehabilitation program offers. “All we're asked to do is to be in the world who God is,” wrote Father Boyle. “Certainly compassion was the wallpaper of Jesus' soul, the contour of his heart, it was who he was. I

heard someone say once, ‘Just assume the answer to every question is compassion.’”⁹

It's a fun game to take Father Boyle's answer to every question seriously. Like “what'll we do about so-and-so who's been driving me crazy?” Answer: *Compassion*. “How'll I get through this night with all the worries I'm carrying?” Answer: *Compassion*. But, like in Jesus' and Father Boyle's examples, compassion is not a surface gesture or a Hallmark emotion, but full-bodied empathy with arms and legs. Compassion doesn't judge, but listens, and then gets busy meeting the need.

9. Gregory Boyle. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). 62.

REFLECT

1. What question or worry is spinning around your mind right now? Imagine the answer is: *compassion*. How does that sit with you?
2. Where (or to whom) do you struggle to extend compassion? Why do you think that is?

RESPOND

Imagine you're with your best friend or your favorite aunt or someone who fully believes in you. How do they extend compassion to you? How can you try this week to extend compassion like that to others?



*“Just assume the
answer to every
question is
compassion.”*

A Blessing for Compassion for All

Blessed are we, God's beloved.
Whether we bask in happiness
of a season of opportunities
or find ourselves bracing against
a fresh storm of hard things.

Blessed are you who are sad and sore,
waiting for the next breath to come more easily.
You are here, and you are loved.

Blessed are you who carry your joy openly,
in the happiness of longings fulfilled.
You are here, and you are loved.

Welcome all, look around!
We might change places tomorrow,
but for now, we are all together
as those who are the beloved of God.

We have been looped together
into the wideness of God's compassion,
into the kinship of the imperfect
who are perfectly loved.

Blessed are we, eyes wide open
to the fact that there's nothing like it,
this love that generates love exponentially:
it doesn't detract.
It only gives.

Here in Advent we see its coming
gentle as the dawn,
healing as sunlight.
Love that actively grows us into our truest selves.
People who can love
just like that.



GOING DEEPER

There are some people who see need and, rather than feeling stuck by the magnitude of the world's pain, they move toward it. Father Greg Boyle is one of those people. Listen as he and Kate make [“A Case for Hope”](#) (40 min).



To learn more about Father Boyle's ministry and work, read his book *Tattoos on the Heart* or watch his [TEDTalk](#) on “Compassion and Kinship.”

Suffering With

“Then Jesus began traveling throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every illness. When he saw the crowds, he was deeply moved with compassion for them, because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

—MATTHEW 9:35-36 (ISV)

Nurse and writer Christie Watson drove eight hours to meet Rachael, “the kindest nurse in Britain.” Rachael took care of people on the edges of society, so far on the periphery that not many could cope with the bundle of issues and illnesses that complicated their lives—drugs, violence, crime, and serious neglect. How did she do it, day in and day out? Christie wanted to know. “We don’t have time to judge them,” Rachael described, “because if we’re busy judging them, we don’t have time to love them.”

Perhaps Rachael is defining what is at the heart of compassion. Compassion is not about judging who deserves our attention or care. It is not about waiting

for someone to change their behaviors or actions before we act in kindness. Compassion is, at its root, suffering with the person in front of us. (Literally, it’s what the word means in Latin: *com* = with, *passus* = suffering.) For anyone who has ever gone through something serious, this kind of compassion is magic that goes straight to the heart, transforming both the receiver and giver.

REFLECT

1. Why do people avoid those who suffer? If you are feeling honest, why do *you* avoid people’s suffering?
2. It is one thing to be the one offering compassion to someone else. It is another to be the recipient. Think of a time someone showed you compassion. How did it make you feel?

RESPOND

Listen to the ultimate Advent song, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (especially the last verse) and reflect on the kindest nurse in all of Britain’s wisdom. This week, how will you challenge yourself to respond in compassion instead of judgment?

A Blessing for Small Kindnesses

We have all been there
where the day is harder than
we have the strength to endure.
And a call comes in,
a friend just wondering how you're doing.
Such grace.

When the workload is crazy,
but it's just for a time and
you keep going until you want to keel over.
And for no reason
someone comes to take some
small task off your plate.
Such grace.

When you have been the caretaker for too long
and you start to lose track of personal hygiene
or what's in the fridge,
and suddenly there's a box of groceries at your door.
Such grace.

Or when it's your turn to be
the one in recovery,
dry-lipped and needing just one ice-cube.

The nurse with the kind face
that guessed it
and came, just in time.
Such grace.

Blessed are the food makers,
the errand doers,
the temporary aunts and uncles
who will swoop in and
take your kid for an afternoon.

Blessed are the noticers, the witnesses,
the thoughtful ones who see
what is happening,
And do the small thing. The next thing.
But it isn't small, is it?
It is a special kind of magic,
because in that moment,
it makes all the difference.



GOING DEEPER

Perhaps you work as a caregiver or caregive for someone in your family. We put together [this support guide](#) to encourage you in the ways you love and serve others.



Katherine and Jay Wolf were newly married and had just welcomed their baby boy when Katherine survived a catastrophic stroke. Katherine had to learn that she was worthy of care, as she's spent years in recovery. [Watch this clip](#) as Katherine shares how we share our worthiness with one another (5 minutes).



Loving Slowly

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 (NIV)

I get it. *I really do.* It is hard to be around suffering. There's only so much we can take. We run out of steam. We are afraid or get overwhelmed by doubts. And sometimes we say really, really stupid things. Like *“Well, at least....”* These are the words of minimizers who want to reframe pain into something more palatable *for them*. It's this kind of performative joy that exhausts the sufferer because suddenly they have become a problem to solve, rather than a person to be present with. Love is slower than that.

Theologian and nurse John Swinton reminds us that we need to be participating in what God is doing in the moment: “the continuing recreation of the world....God's time is gentle, generous. It moves at the speed of love.” So the next time you are feeling

uncomfortable in the face of someone's suffering or tempted to reach for words like “well, at least...,” slow down. Move at the speed of love instead.

REFLECT

1. What are some of the most compassionate responses you have heard said to someone who is suffering?
2. What is your economy of time? Do you have plenty of time or never enough? How can you slow down this season and walk at the pace of love?

RESPOND

There are so many of us who are in “the fellowship of the afflicted,” as my friend Margaret Feinberg describes. Think of someone who is struggling. Send them a note or snail mail them a card reminding them that you are “On your team, always.”



A Blessing our Good Intentions

What do you want for Christmas?
The togetherness everybody needs,
the plans that will ensure the smiles, the delights,
the joys we want for the people we love.
For everyone to get along for once.

But God, how can we fit all these good intentions
into the limited time we have?
And what if people won't cooperate this year
and the angels don't sing?
And there's not enough love to go around?
What if it won't be a Hallmark Christmas?

God, bless our good intentions and our longings,
and within them, free us.
Free us from our compressed agendas.
May we recognize, instead, our days are human-sized.

Free us from performative and prescriptive joy,
the pressure to fix and solve.
May we have eyes to see the gentle delights that grow naturally.
Give us compassion for ourselves and others,
and moments that are lived at the speed of love.



GOING DEEPER

Want to get better at responding to people's pain? Kate offers what to say and what not to say to those who are suffering in her *New York Times* article, "[What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party.](#)"



Listen to John Swinton explain the speed of love in [this clip](#) (1 minute) or listen to Kate and John's entire conversation, "[The Speed of Love](#)" (33 minutes).



WEEK 03

the promise of *restoration*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14 TO SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20





It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth
to touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the earth, good will to men,
from heaven’s all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come
with peaceful wings unfurled,
and still their heavenly music floats
o’er all the weary world;
above its sad and lowly plains,
they bend on hovering wing,
and ever o’er its Babel sounds
the blessed angels sing.

And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,

whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
and hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on,
by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years
shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth
its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song
which now the angels sing.

Edmund H. Sears. “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” *Christian Register* 28 no. 52 (1849): 206. <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/it-came-upon-the-midnight-clear>.

The Advent of Restoration

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.”

—ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (NRSV)

Sometimes it's hard to catch the spirit of Christmas joy because it feels so far from reality. We have broken hearts and broken bodies and broken spirits. We may know intellectually that we are part of a bigger story of restoration, one foretold by prophets of Israel then sang out in the glad songs of angels to those obscure shepherds.

It's a story of “peace on earth and good will for all people” (Luke 2:14). One where fear and death will be no more. Judgment and shame will be eclipsed by delight. No loneliness. No illness. No shame. A story where everyone belongs.

The more we notice the difference between what should be and *what is*, our Christmas joy shrinks to the size of a snow-globe. *Not heaven come down.*

Yet what if the smallness of that all-too-perfect Christmas snow-globe we loved as kids could be a sneaky little symbol of hope? In it, we catch a glimpse of a perfected world, of a restoration that will one day be complete, of a not-yet-ness that God has promised to see through.

So next time you get the chance, pick it up and give that snow-globe a shake. Watch the snow settle on the scene, and remember that you are not alone. God sees you and loves you. You have not been forgotten. God is in the work of restoring it all.

PRACTICE ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime some of the kids in your life. Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath and take turns reading Zephaniah 3:14-20 (Each person can read one verse and go around in a circle). Light two of the purple candles and the pink candle. The third Sunday of Advent symbolizes joy, and its candle is called the “Shepherds’ Candle.” The Shepherds’ Candle is so-called because of the message of the angels to the shepherds: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,” and the shepherds’ joy at finding the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. The candle is pink because rose is the liturgical color for joy.

REFLECT

1. What is the best party you’ve ever attended? What made it so special and full of joy?
2. What does restoration mean to you?
3. The scripture says, “he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it” (Zeph 3:17b). How do you imagine it will feel when God restores you and throws a party with rejoicing and singing? How will it feel to be renewed in God’s love?

RESPOND

This week, look for signs of the already-but-not-yet-ness of the season. How do you embrace the joy and sit with the suffering? How can you mourn for the present and rejoice for the future? How can you pour out love on others as an act of restoration and hope?

A Blessing for Our Part in the Bigger Story

Blessed are we,
gathered already into the plot,
part of the epic story you have been writing
from long before we were ever born.

Thank you that we are not separated
into lives of loneliness
but joined together as those who were loved into being.
We are made for meaning and a purpose
that only our days can breathe into action.

Pull us closer to the bigger story that reminds us
that our ordinary lives are the stuff of eternity.
You fitted each of our days
for small efforts and endless attempts
to pick ourselves up again.
In our triumphs and embarrassments,
we need to be told again (sigh)
that we are not just everyday problems.
We are a story of extraordinary love.



Finding Wholeness

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

—JOHN 10:10B (NIV)

The prophet Ezekiel is shown a vision of a valley of dry bones—the wake of devastation from war and famine and disease that his people knew too well. God (rather surprisingly) asks him, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel sees only death and devastation before him. Utter hopelessness. But, at the breath of God, sinew and muscle and movement appear before Ezekiel’s eyes as the people are made whole. Life is restored to them. God says, “Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them” (Ezekiel 37:13, NIV). This is a vision of what God is in the business

of doing. Restoration. It’s what Jesus came to begin at Christmas, and see through to the end at Easter and beyond.

Advent sees this restoration as a long and slanting light. It meets our eyes, and suddenly we can see hope where there was none. We start to see life where there was only decay. That is the work of this kind of hope. Like shoots of green in a crack in the concrete. Like a song calling through the dark. We see it all the time: life where there should be none. May we see these small miracles everywhere today.

REFLECT

1. What does the word “vitality” mean to you? Does it feel familiar or foreign to your current experience? Why?
2. Theologian Howard Thurman said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”¹¹ What stands out to you from this quote? How does it make you feel?

RESPOND

Spend some time getting in touch with how you feel during various parts of the day. See if you can connect vitality and joy with Christmas preparation anytime throughout your day, and make a mental note of what was happening then. What puts a spring in your step and joy in your heart as you lean into the promise of Christmas joy and new life?

11. Howard Thurman (1974): quoted in Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1994). xv.



A Blessing for New Hope

God, sometimes the dry bones stay dry.
The dead stay dead.
Actually, most of the time.
Fine. All of the time.

But you make exceptions.

Thank you for a newborn baby,
who turned the world toward love.

Thank you for a newborn moment
when you turned love toward me.

And for all the times
when the dry stays dry
and what's gone stays gone,
make Advent the loveliest reminder
that you have the uncanny ability
to bring everything back to life.



GOING DEEPER

When writer Heather Lanier's daughter was born with a rare genetic syndrome, she learned that the world will not always see her beloved as good. And yet, our imaginative Creator declared the goodness of all God created. [Watch this clip](#) (3 minutes) where Kate and Heather talk about goodness that cannot be measured.

The Best Present

“And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart.”

—EZEKIEL 36:26 (NLT)

We may not even realize how calloused our hearts have become until we meet someone who softens us. After countless trips to the hospital, it felt like I was treated as a number. Maybe you’ve experienced something similar. Pain being dismissed. Discharged with little answers or solutions. Feeling alone in your illness or grief. But this time was different. I met a nurse who thumbed through my thick charts. And with just a few words she restored my dignity.

“What they did to you was absolutely wrong,” she acknowledged. “I just want you to know, on behalf of all of us, *I’m really sorry.*”

For years, I needed acknowledgment of my pain and justification that what I went through wasn’t fair. And here were the three words I had been waiting for: “I am sorry.” Isn’t it just lovely how we can give the gift of dignity back to one another? Slowly, we may find our hearts melting with mercy and love.

REFLECT

1. What is the condition of your heart right now? Is it full of joy and love? Is it guarded and protected? Is it beat-up and bruised?
2. How would it feel to hear someone say, “I am sorry that happened to you. It wasn’t right”? How would words of compassion and kindness restore your heart today?

RESPOND

Is there a way you can give this gift of restoration to someone else today? It doesn’t have to be for something you did personally. It could be by acknowledging the pain and struggle of another person and saying “I am sorry this is happening to you.”



A Blessing for When It's Not Fair (It Really Isn't)

The last time anyone let me say it–
tears in my eyes, straight from the heart–
I was a child.

Didn't anyone tell you?
Life isn't fair.

So I swallow it up.

But, God, without hearing you say it–
“My love, this isn't fair”–
I am heartsick.

I ate this sadness and
it became embarrassment;

I ate this disappointment
and it became bitterness.

God, let me hear you again say,
“My Love, this isn't fair.”

You will give me strength
to take another step
and courage to face my circumstances.
But, before the doing and trying
and getting-back-up,
you simply look at me and say,
“I love you. I'm sorry.
Let me bless this heartsick day.”¹²

12. Kate Bowler. “When It's Not Fair (It Really Isn't)” in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 13.



GOING DEEPER

Listen as Kate shares the full story of how she received the great gift of restoration from a stranger in this conversation she has with Judy Woodruff in, “[How Will We Live These Beautiful, Terrible Days](#)” (6 minutes).

Ordinary and Extraordinary Miracles

“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

—ROMANS 8:23 (NRSVUE)

We celebrate the miracle of the incarnation at Christmas. It is the belief that Jesus came into the world as a human, and, therefore, understands first hand what it's like to live in a body. He knew physical pain, suffered hunger and thirst, and cried real tears. He is “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3, KJV). In the incarnation, Jesus signals that the physical world is a place where he has entered in order to work and to bless. But he doesn't direct us to magical levers we must push in order to merit his attention. There's a longer trajectory to the restoration we are receiving.

Sarah Bessey in her book *Miracles and Other Reasonable Things* tells about how a serious car accident changed so much in her understanding of living in a body—especially one that breaks. She writes:

*We are made in the image of God, (Genesis 1:27) communal by creation. And my body isn't an impediment to knowing and following and embracing God. It's part of the whole redemption. It is also redeemed, blessed by the incarnation all over again. Even my body, as it now stood, both healed and unhealed, was blessed.*¹³

13. Sarah Bessey. *Miracles and Other Reasonable Things*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019). 194.

By choosing to be one with us this way, compacting all divinity into small flesh to live and move as we do, Jesus shows his respect and love for the body, and his desire to save us, body and soul. While he walked on earth, he prioritized healing people's physical bodies. But how do we cope when we pray for healing, but it doesn't happen? As Sarah says, we must learn to "hold both grief and hope in [our] hands at the same time." There are glimpses of the restoration that are coming and have already begun this Advent. May we have eyes to see both the ordinary and extraordinary miracles along the way.

REFLECT

1. Can you think of any "ordinary miracles" in your life? Things that make you pause with wonder? Can you remember specific moments when the natural world awakened a sense of curiosity or awe within you?
2. Sarah talks about joy and sorrow as feelings that can be experienced alongside one another. How do you see these contrasts affecting one another in your own life?

RESPOND

Go for a sensory holiday in a place that awakens wonder—a walk in a nearby forest or park, take time to sit and stare at the Christmas tree and every ornament, or make your favorite holiday treat and really savor it. Or while you are doing a necessary errand or chore, notice the details of what your body is sensing. Just for an hour, give yourself the freedom to simply see and hear and touch. Are there any ordinary miracles here?

A Blessing for the Glimpses

Only in fleeting glimpses do we see it, God,
the coming of your kingdom.

The scented lilac,
the velvet of new grass,
and, let's be honest, I'm sometimes bowled over
by the smell of fresh laundry.
I don't even mind.

Then there's the ever-so familiar slope of shoulder,
the curve and tilt of that beloved head,
so particular to one story only.

The remembrances that ache a little
because of what we've lost,
and what we've gained.

The people who are radiant with love given
and received.

All that has been done that is thoughtful
or brave or gentle,
or simply just very competent.
Sometimes that's more than enough.

All these glimpses remind us
that everything in the world that is good
is actually *from* you.
And that because of this we know there
will be more.

Promises fulfilled.
Restoration complete.
Come, Lord Jesus.



GOING DEEPER

Sarah Bessey is an author and preacher who speaks right to the soft spot where our deepest pain and deepest hope meet. Read Sarah's book, *Miracles and Other Reasonable Things*, and listen as Kate and Sarah talk about it in their conversation, "[Ordinary Miracles](#)" (34 minutes).

Clearing the Path

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

—ISAIAH 40:3-5 (NIV)

According to the prophet Isaiah, perhaps the best symbol for Advent is a bulldozer that makes every path smooth. Or maybe a forklift that shuttles the biggest rocks out of the way. God’s glory will not be hidden by any nook or cranny or mountain or valley. It was a glory that Isaiah foresaw and was echoed again by John the Baptist. (We were introduced to John in Week Two of Advent, when we spoke of his mother Elizabeth’s unlikely pregnancy at an old age.)

John announced to the crowds that God had come among them, that Jesus was the longed for Messiah. He encouraged the people to “Repent!” Now, repent is not a word we hear much these days, and when we

do it may sound harsh to our ears. But what it means is a full 180 degree change of mind and behavior, orienting ourselves to the coming kingdom of love. Repenting is not a matter of first changing ourselves from bad to good so we can be worthy of loving. Rather, repenting begins by realizing the truth that we already belong. We are already loved. John was calling the people to bulldoze whatever blocks the way for you to experience the coming of the Promised One, whether it is pain or doubt or disappointment, or even self-condemnation. What is standing in your way?

REFLECT

1. Father Greg Boyle says, “One of the many impediments to hearing the only message God longs to communicate to us is our marriage to the pain we carry and the lament that accompanies it.”¹⁴ Are you married to your pain or lament or despair? Reflect on how that has stood as an impediment blocking the experience of God’s love for you.

2. The very real things we need to cry over do matter, yet they are not the only things. Sometimes it takes a loving hand to turn our chins toward the tenderness of God for us too. It’s a both/and kind of situation. How does this tension sit with you today?

RESPOND

At Christmas especially, our expectations can become impediments to giving and receiving love. Myths around perfectionism or unfulfilled hopes or loneliness can become the loudest voices in the room. Take a moment to tell them to pipe down, so you have some brain-space for gratitude. What comes forward instead?

14. Gregory Boyle. *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017). 19.

A Blessing for Seeing Things Differently

Blessed are we, starting to notice
the love that sees things differently.
The hug that lasts long enough,
the glance that is tender enough
to melt the distance between us.

Blessed are we,
starting to understand that it's you, God,
and your gaze that lights the way.
Complete acceptance and delight.
It's you, starting your big renovation project,
your compassion that transforms the world.
Your tenderness that reaches each one to the core.

You will shine in all the shadowy places
that mountains of shame had kept hidden.
You will heal from the inside every wound
that bitterness had carved into your being.

Blessed are we, starting to see our part
in leveling the path for others
as best we can,
removing the rocks and
filling in the potholes,
glad that you've got the rest.



GOING DEEPER

Gratitude is complicated. It is a gift to see the good and beautiful things in our lives, but it can also feel like a muzzle that limits our ability to tell the truth. [Watch this clip](#) (3 minutes) to think more with Kate about what this means.

You Belong (and Her Too)

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-27 (NIV)

Christmas is a season marked by giving. In fact, the tradition of gift-giving has its roots in begging. Up until the 12th century, Advent was the time when the marginalized and the poor were free to go door-to-door to beg for food, treats, or money. But around the year 1100, a group of nuns started to put little gifts in the shoes of children, telling them these presents were from Saint Nicholas. Thus began the tradition of Santa Claus.

At Christmas especially, we try to be extra generous and kind. But it’s hard, isn’t it? Especially when we have divisions and old fights and rules about what to say or not to say at the dinner table (and we all have the uncle who breaks some *VERY CLEAR RULES* about not describing things he reads on Facebook). But cue the angels, singing out their joy at the good news of Jesus’ birth and “great joy which will be to *all people*” (Luke 2:10, NKJV, emphasis mine). All people—even those who we’d prefer to leave on our naughty list.

I suppose that's where the Apostle Paul's imaginary conversation in 1 Corinthians 12 comes in. He describes how the various parts of the body need each other. The eye can't walk, nor can the foot see. In the same way, every human has something irreplaceable to offer one another, a special role in the body of Christ. We belong to God, and to one another. For in every person, we find the image of God. May we have hearts open to give and receive this Christmas (even if we are feeling a little Scrooge-like ourselves).

REFLECT

1. 1 Corinthians 12:16 says, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (NIV). Every member of the body of Christ is worthy of protection and care. How has someone offered you dignity and care?
2. We all lose our patience. Think of an interaction that still remains strong in your memory because of the way you handled it. What mixed emotions are you remembering? Was this your best self, or is there some part you wish you had handled differently?

RESPOND

The culture of self-help and independence often tries to teach us that we don't need anybody else—which is simply not true. How can you practice the opposite—community-help and interdependence—this week?

A Blessing for Learning to Belong

Come closer, and let me tell you what God said,
because it changed everything.
It's an identity, a home address.
And God wrote it on my heart so I'd never forget:
"You belong."

It's not just that I am accepted,
(for the tolerant will stretch to that—on a good day).
No. I am needed and wanted. And so are you.
Why? Because of everything we are, right now.

Each one of us is just the right shape
and size and color,
the exact flavor that was missing

before we showed up.
Different as you are, different as I am,
we belong.

So now I have to tell myself,
don't hold back.
Bring it, most generously,
your whole actual self,
as truly as you know how.

God has something beautiful
in mind that includes us all.
So come and risk it,
enter into the restoration
that is on the way,
the Advent of belonging.



GOING DEEPER

Rainn Wilson (Dwight Schrute of NBC's *The Office*) says that we need a spiritual revolution. Kate and Rainn talk about this idea of belonging as a way of counter-ing the culture of self-help. [Watch this clip](#) (9 minutes) to learn more about how our human nature longs to be part of something bigger.

Light in the Darkness

“Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.”

—ISAIAH 9:1-3; 6 (NIV)

Today marks the shortest day of the year. Darkness snuffs out the light, sometimes as early as mid-afternoon (depending on where you live). All may seem bleak, as we wait for the dawn to break. It is because of these shortening days that an Advent tradition with origins in the middle ages found a unique adaptation in Sweden around 1800. Swedish children wear white and process into homes, schools, and community centers, each carrying a candle except for one girl who leads them. She plays the role of St Lucia, wearing candles as a crown on her head and carrying a basket of saffron scented buns and

gingerbread cookies. St Lucia (a name that means light) was a third century Italian saint venerated because of her martyrdom, but known widely because she was credited with answered prayer when food was badly needed. Help came to people on a ship that arrived in the harbor with a beautiful woman in white standing at its bow.

Often we associate the lights dimming with the growing of our fears. It is no wonder that the welcoming of the reign of good over evil, of love over hate, is central to Christmas and to recognizing Jesus as the light of the world.

REFLECT

1. What are your surprising or beloved Christmas traditions? Finish the sentence: *At Christmas, we always...*

2. In our darkness, we welcome the light. In our hunger, we welcome the arrival of a delicious meal. In our sadness, we welcome joy. What is the need you are experiencing just now? What is the arrival you most desire?

RESPOND

“People, Look East”¹⁵ is an Advent song that invites everyone to look to where the sun will arise. To await the light that will one day chase away all darkness. The last verse says:

*Angels, announce with shouts of mirth
Christ who brings new life to earth.
Set every peak and valley humming
With the word, the Lord is coming.
People, look east and sing today:
Love, the Lord, is on the way.*

What would Love’s arrival look like for you? Picture it, let it sink in, and rest there awhile.

Eleanor Farjeon. “People, Look East” in *The Oxford Book of Carols*. Ed. Percy Dearmer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw. (London: Oxford University Press, 1928). 162.

A Blessing for the Light

In the light that meets our eyes at the dawning of the day
and paints each created thing so lovingly
with color and texture, shade and shadow,
you give us delight.

In the light that meets our eyes in the setting of the sun
and bathes the world in burnished gold,
you give us peace.

In the dusk that blankets us in darkness,
and settles the world in deepest blues,
you give us rest.

God, the three in one,
bless our days and for our nights,
for the time we have,
and for the eternity we glimpse from afar.
If it weren't for the miracle of your love come down,
we wouldn't have known what to hope for.
O Come, Lord Jesus.¹⁶



16. Inspired by "Phos Hilaron" in *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*. (London: Church House Publishing, 2000). 783.

GOING DEEPER

In Sweden, the story is told of a terrible famine in the Middle Ages which was relieved by the arrival of a ship bearing food and a beautiful, radiant woman in white at the helm. In Syracuse, Sicily, they speak of a famine in the midst of which folk went to the church of St Lucia to pray whereupon a grain ship sailed into the harbor. In both Italy and Sweden, Saint Lucia or Lucy represents light and the promise of spring's renewal. Some scholars say that the Swedish version of Lucia is actually a descendant of the Christ Child who was the Protestant Reformation's replacement for St Nicholas. By the early twentieth century, Lucia was a popular figure all across the country.



On December 13, a “Lucy Bride,” a girl dressed in white with a red sash and a crown of candles and lingonberries, has ceremonial responsibilities. In the home, she will bring coffee and cakes to her parents. In schools or public institutions, she leads a parade of similarly-clad young women and Star Boys. Across Europe, December 13 will be a time of bonfires and torchlit parades. In the Tyrol, Lucia is a gift-bringer who delivers presents to girls, while St Nicholas attends to the boys. [Watch as the Carolinae Ladies Choir in Lund give a preview of a candlelit Lucia procession.](#)

WEEK 04

the promise of *justice*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21 TO WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24



O Holy Night

O holy night, the stars are
 brightly shining,
 It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;
 Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
 'Till he appeared and the soul
 felt its worth.
 A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
 For yonder breaks a new
 and glorious morn;

Fall on your knees,
 Oh hear the angel voices!
 O night divine!
 O night when Christ was born.
 O night, O holy night, O night divine.
 Led by the light of Faith
 serenely beaming;
 With glowing hearts
 by his cradle we stand:
 So, led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
 Here come the wise men from Orient
 land,
 The King of Kings lay thus

in lowly manger,
 In all our trials born to be our friend;

 He knows our need,
 To our weakness no stranger!
 Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
 Behold your King! your King!
 before him bend!
 Truly He taught us to love one another;
 His law is Love and His gospel is Peace;
 Chains shall he break,
 for the slave is our brother,
 And in his name
 all oppression shall cease,
 Sweet hymns of joy
 in grateful Chorus raise we;
 Let all within us praise his Holy name!

Christ is the Lord, then ever!
 ever praise we!
 His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim! ¹⁷

17. John Sullivan Dwight and Adolphe Adam. "O Holy Night," featuring Thomas Chalmers, Church Of The Ascension Choir. Audio.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/jukebox-761426/>. Recorded 1909.

The Spark of Life

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’”

—LUKE 1:46-55 (NRSVUE)

* You can also listen to this scripture by playing “Mary’s Song” by Our King of Peace, available on our Spotify Playlist.

These poetic verses are known as the Magnificat, the song of Mary. She sings out with joy that within her womb is the tiny spark of life who will save the world. Somehow, Mary sees it clearly—a world of justice and mercy, where every wrong has been made right. She rejoices in a glorious future, but one that has, at the same time, already been secured.

This is a gentle revolution, not some grand show of power. God chooses the margins of society, where God will be born in dire circumstances, to an unwed mother in unsanitary conditions without a proper roof over her head. To an embarrassed new dad, forced to scoop up his family and flee the country from a powerful and vengeful king. This is the world that God chose to enter at Christmas. Our world. So God could be the difference we didn’t know it needed. Thanks be to God.



PRACTICE ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime some of the kids in your life. Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath and light three of the purple candles and the pink candle.

REFLECT

1. When was the last time you were surprised by something?
2. Many people were surprised that Jesus chose to enter the world as a baby—especially through these surprising circumstances. If Jesus were to be born today, where do you think he might appear?

RESPOND

When Mary was surprised by the angels' news, she responded with a joyful song, despite all her fears about the future. What is something that you could trust God with in your own life (despite your fears)? How easy or difficult is that for you?

A Blessing for the Coming of Justice



Blessed are we, starting to see the height and depth and breadth
of God's love that includes all of us, even the not-so-perfect.

Blessed are you, Mary, for saying yes to the big risk
of being God's dwelling place.

Blessed are we, like Mary, starting to sing our own songs of joy
at the thought that maybe this Advent we too can start to trust it,
to risk it, to live it out,
the love that decides to love first, before it is earned or deserved,
the love that your incarnation embodies
to the full.

Blessed are we, breathing in the truth that we belong,
and so does everybody else.

Stonecatchers

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

—MICAH 6:8 (NRSVA)

For lawyer Bryan Stevenson, doing justice has meant spending a lifetime not only being a witness to injustice, but working to reverse it. He continues to fight a system that treats those who are rich and guilty better than those who are poor and innocent. He is compelled by the story in John 8, when Jesus stands in front of a woman about to be stoned. “Whoever among you is guiltless may be the first to throw a stone at her,” he says (John 8:7, NET). One at a time, the convicted men drop their rocks and walk away. Bryan says this instance reminds him not to be a stonethrower, *but a stonecatcher*.

Advent ushers in the promise of justice. But perhaps it is not justice as the world sees, but justice as Jesus defines it. Justice that is inherently linked to mercy. To paraphrase theologian G.K. Chesterton, the innocent call for justice and the guilty call for mercy. The only way we can know what justice looks like in any circumstance is to look to Jesus, the ultimate stonecatcher. The one who calls us to forgiveness, who embodies mercy on the cross, who challenges us to turn the world upside-down (or maybe right-side up) this Christmas, to see people not as the worst thing they’ve ever done, but through a lens of love and grace.

REFLECT

1. How do you understand the relationship between justice and mercy?
2. Jesus came to be the judge who knows how to thread the needle between justice and mercy. What is the justice you seek? What is the mercy you long for?

RESPOND

Jesus told the religious leaders of his day that morality was bigger than their rules could contain, and yet it could be summed up in two simple principles: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31) Think about the most unjust situation in your world right now. How might these principles help to address it?



A Blessing for Savoring Advent

O God, we're here at the tipping point
when Advent has poured out all her wisdom,
every blessing and every gift of anticipation's store.

They are ours already.
Tucked into our pockets,
waiting to be drawn out and treasured
in the time of this new mystery before us,
your holy birth and our celebration.

Bless us this Christmas
though we are not ready.
Slow us down,
so that we will be able to remember
your truth, your compassion,
your restoration, your justice.

And that good things come
in small packages.
Portable, and human-sized,
for your burden is light.



GOING DEEPER

Learn more about how Bryan Stevenson discovered this idea of being a stonecatcher from a mother sharing mercy to other mothers. [Watch this beautiful story](#) (4 minutes).



Take this conversation further. Use this [podcast discussion guide](#) with friends or a small group to explore more of what it means to be a stonecatcher.

MORE ON THE MAGNIFICAT

When Mary sings of what God has done in her Magnificat, she is the only one who knows that God has already fulfilled God's promises. She is the one who knows that the Savior has arrived (Luke 1:47), that God has been faithful to the covenant (1:55; Lev 26:12), and that God has chosen to come into the world through lowly means to reach those who need God the most (Luke 1:48). Mary had no power, no money, no husband, no house, and no respect. And yet, God saw her, chose her, and called her blessed. That is why Mary can praise the goodness and the redeeming work of God in the present tense, each declaration explaining what God has already done (1:51-54). For Mary, the acts of God reveal God's heart for the weary, oppressed, anxious, exiled, and afraid. God is flipping the world upside-down (or perhaps right-side up) by seeing the overlooked, humbling the proud, lifting the lowly, feeding the hungry, and keeping God's promises (1:50-55). God's faithfulness stretches from generation to generation and is better than anything we could have imagined. A Savior is born to an unlikely mother who cannot contain her joy. A joy not only for herself, but for everyone who finds themselves left out or skipped over, for the generations who have waited for this promise to be fulfilled. Thanks be to God.



A Blessing for the Coming of Justice

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Christmas Eve

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

—LUKE 2:1-14, 15-20 (NIV)

This birth (any birth for that matter) is a miracle. *But this one especially.* A teenage mother, belly stretched far beyond capacity or comfort, searches for a place to not only rest, but to give birth. A baby is born amid hay and feed. Their first visitors were shepherds, often viewed by some as the outcasts of society. This is the way God chose to meet us, not with power and opulence, but with tenderness and fragility on full display.

Something that took place over 2000 years ago still resounds through us today. Christ is born tonight. “A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,” the Advent

hymn invites us to sing along. Christ’s birth is realized hope. One of truth, compassion, restoration, and justice. But it’s not a hope just available for those at the tippy top. It’s hope for the rest of us. For the anxious. For the afraid. For the vulnerable. For the not-feeling-so-joyful. For the overwhelmed and at-the-end-of-their-rope. For the least of these. For the left-out and the lonely. *For the weary.*

For each of us and the whole world alongside us. We rejoice together for Christ has been born, the Emmanuel, God with us. Thanks be to God.

PRACTICE ADVENT TOGETHER

Whoever you gather with on Christmas Eve, find time to light your Advent wreath together. On this last night of Advent, light the purple and pink candles. The white candle in the middle of the wreath represents Christ. As you light the white center candle, reflect on the birth of Christ as the Emmanuel, God is with us.

REFLECT

1. Jesus arrives in tenderness. Where do you see and feel the tenderness and extravagant love of God today?
2. Christmas Eve can be the peaceful pause or last minute rush before the joy of Christmas morning. It can be a tough day for some who are grieving or lonely, and for others it can feel full of anticipation and excitement. How are you feeling today? How do you know that Christ is with you at this moment?

RESPOND

We come as we are to the manger, weary or excited, mourning or rejoicing. Take a minute to sing along or listen to the words of “*O Holy Night*,” as you reflect on all that you have learned about the promises and character of God this Advent season.



A Blessing for Christmas Eve

You are here. What a wonder.
Robed in the everyday majesty
of a newborn.
So beautiful, so soft, so new.
Perfect in the terrifying fragility
that thrills every parent.
“Watch his head!”
“Look at those tiny fingernails.”
God become human,
blinking at strange, new surroundings.
All wisdom and power
poured into a smallness
that knows hunger and gravity
and unseen urgency for your mother’s skin.
And Mary, so newly parted from you,
turns her thoughts to the impossible
angelic visitation that promised
you’d come.

And she knew, somehow,
staring at your eyelashes,
that you were a great reversal,
here to put all things right.

Blessed are we when our hearts
warm with her.
You’re here. And we are too,
newly come to worship
with kings and shepherds
and barn animals and angels
as you light up the world on
this holiest, loveliest night.¹⁸

18. Kate Bowler. “For Christmas Eve” in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 193.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

DECEMBER 25TH TO JANUARY 6TH

Advent may be over, but Christmas has just begun. Join us for the 12 Days of Christmas—what is known as Christmastide—which runs from December 25th to January 6th. Christmastide is about the gradual departure of the darkness and the gentle drawing of light at Epiphany. We don't have to cram all of Christmas into one day. Instead, we shed the pressure of "the holidays" and take on a new, relaxed rhythm of celebration. Here you will find short prompts to make this Christmas season a meaningful one.

To begin, if you have a Christmas manger scene, or crèche, put the baby Jesus in his manger. Find some

wise men (or make them out of Legos!) and put them far away. Each day of Christmastide, move the wise men closer and closer to the manger, to Jesus, the light of the world. On January 6, they arrive, and the season of light begins, Epiphany.

We have not been exactly here before, and again it is time to take hold of some fierce hope. Take courage! If you have had a hectic Advent or Christmas Day this year, Christmastide is a gentle way for you to release the grip of anticipation and walk toward joy.

Christmas Day

DECEMBER 25

READ: Psalm 97:1-6

PRACTICE: Save a present to open on the evening of January 5th, Twelfth Night, to mark the end of Christmastide.

LISTEN: "O Come, All Ye Faithful!"

St. Stephen's Day (Boxing Day)

DECEMBER 26

READ: Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59

PRACTICE: Eat leftovers. Go for a walk or have a rest. The heart of love is in the small things, so do some random act of giving today.

LISTEN: "Good King Wenceslas"

St. John the Evangelist's Day

DECEMBER 27

READ: John 1:1-18

PRACTICE: Take a note from the Apostle John by spreading the "good news" to someone else in a small way. The good news is the light, so set aside time to light a candle, grab a glass of wine or cider, and relax in the glow.

LISTEN: "The Wexford Carol"

The Feast of the Innocents

DECEMBER 28

READ: Matthew 2:13-18

PRACTICE: Pray specifically for world leaders. Make a gesture of peace (unobtrusively) toward someone you know, in the spirit of loving those you don't find easy to love.

LISTEN: "Sweet Little Jesus Boy"

The Feast of Thomas Beckett

DECEMBER 29

READ: Luke 2:22-40

PRACTICE: Send an email of thanks to someone who has been a spiritual inspiration to you.

LISTEN: "The Cherry Tree Carol"

The Feast of The Holy Family

DECEMBER 30

READ: Luke 2:41-52

PRACTICE: Call up someone you haven't talked to forever. Or declare it a quiet day and read a good book.

LISTEN: "Still, Still, Still"

New Year's Eve

DECEMBER 31

READ: Philippians 1:3-6

PRACTICE: Instead of making New Year's resolutions, write a card to your family members or friends, telling them what your good wishes or blessings are for them in the coming year.

LISTEN: "Auld Lang Syne"

New Year's Day

JANUARY 01

READ: Psalm 72

PRACTICE: Set aside time to come together with family or friends virtually or in person, bless the year and each other, sharing your blessings or cards or messages you wrote. Then, write a blessing for yourself.

LISTEN: "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree"

St. Basil's Day

JANUARY 02

READ: James 1:17

PRACTICE: Think about the year ahead and write in your calendar reminders of the blessings you have been given as little breadcrumbs that will help to trace a story of hope.

LISTEN: "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly"

The Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

JANUARY 03

READ: Psalm 8

PRACTICE: Say the name of Jesus reverently throughout the day as an internal "Yes" to the light coming into the world.

LISTEN: "Huron Carol"

JANUARY 04

READ: Psalm 103:11-13

PRACTICE: The Christmas celebration is not over yet. Do something fun that involves delicious food or a yummy cocktail.

LISTEN: "Children, Go Where I Send Thee"

Eve of the Epiphany

JANUARY 05

READ: Galatians 4:4-5

PRACTICE: Open the gift you saved on Christmas Day. Share what has felt the most meaningful during this Christmastide season.

LISTEN: "We Three Kings of Orient Are!"

Epiphany

JANUARY 06

READ: Matthew 2:1-12

PRACTICE: Light all the candles in the house.

Bring the Wise Men into the manger. Enjoy the Christmas lights one more time. Rest.

LISTEN: “As With Gladness Men of Old”

Season of Light

JANUARY 07

READ: Isaiah 42:1-9

PRACTICE: It’s time to take down your tree. Reflect on what it means to enter the season of light.

LISTEN: “This Little Light of Mine”



THE
WEARY
WORLD
Rejoices