



the season of *almost*

A 4-Week Advent Devotional

by Kate Bowler

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“A Christmas candle is a lovely thing; It makes no noise at all, But softly gives itself away; While quite unselfish, it grows small.”

— EVA K. LOGUE

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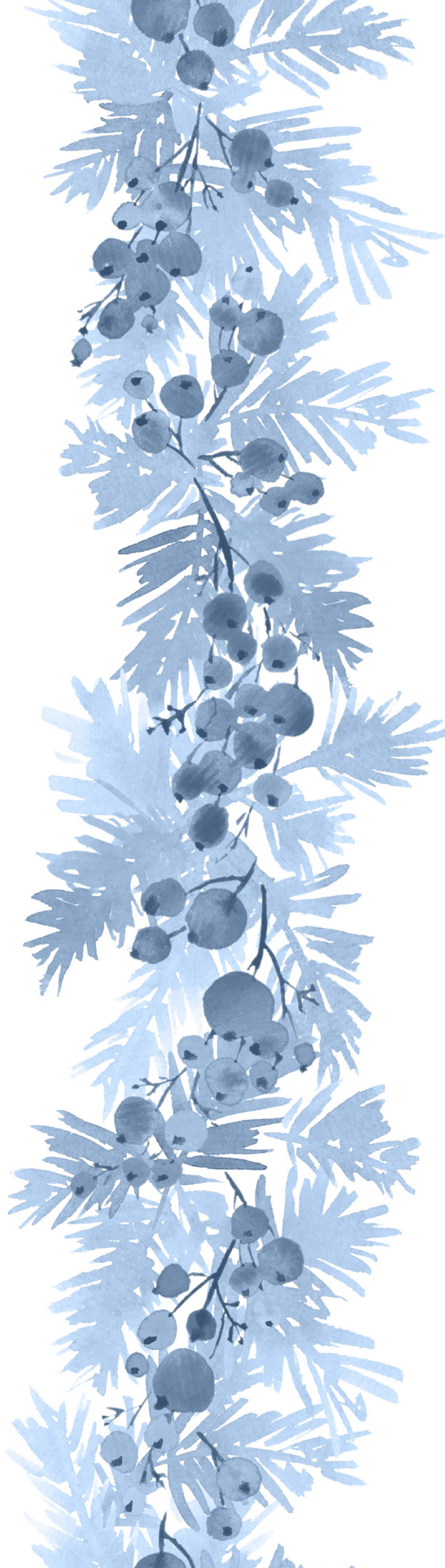
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CHRISTMASTIDE



Hello my dear,

Remember our old normal? When holidays were synonymous with shopping deals and a flurry of presents and acts of charity. For one day at least, the poor were clothed, the hungry fed, families were together. But now another pandemic Christmas is coming, and again, there will be not enough.

Oh how we need Christmas, but not Christmas as usual.

As the world tilts toward another Christmas, we see how the pandemic keeps surprising us with its ability to stalk and destabilize. Yes, we have vaccines, but we also have variants and breakthrough infections and fear and loneliness. Yes, we have booster shots and more and more little ones are getting access, but not everyone. So many are deprived either by circumstance, geography, or misinformation. We see economic progress, but also troubling supply chain issues and job losses with unprecedented pressures on teachers and health care workers. Yes, there have been frightening epidemics before in the world, but none so political and ideological. This unspeakably long crisis has torn families and friendships and communities apart. The stumbling blocks of our frail humanity are laid bare.

And yet and yet and yet. The long dawn of Advent begins, for now is the season of an ever-growing and ever-kindly light—the one that lets us see reality more clearly.

Advent is preparation for the great inversion: God coming to Earth in the form of a baby; the ruler of the cosmos trapped in a squalling package of helpless flesh. He was born to save us—and he will—but first he must melt our hearts, appearing not as a sage or a philosopher or an emperor but as a cold little child with no home. He disarms us with his tender vulnerability and summons us to enter his world as little children, too.

For many, this is where the story ends: a gentle knock on the door of the human heart. This tender moment of conscience is well-suited to acts of charity, which allow people to keep their roles: giver and receiver, rich and poor, high and low, immigrant and local, white and black, police and policed. A tiny blip in our normal consumerism and capitalism.

But Christmas beckons us to see the Kingdom of God through the disruption of the ordinary. “The last will be first” (Matthew 20:16). “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” (Luke 1:52).

People are hungry for the world turned upside-down, which is precisely what Christmas has been throughout Christian history. Medieval Western Europe allotted Christmas days to different groups at the margins of society—servants, old women, young girls, and children—allowed them to step forward and demand charity from their masters. The magic of this time of year was a moment of suspension (if temporary) of business as usual, of the world turned upside-down. Where the least of these are cared for, protected, upheld.

Now that 2021 has shaken our world all over again, our inner desires and deepest needs are revealed. We see the world as it has always been. And we are here, waiting with bated breath for the kingdom of God to break in.

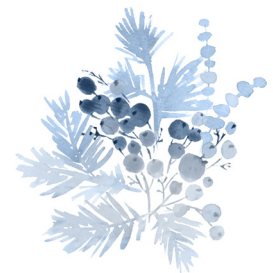
This is the season of almost. We learn to sit in the faint glow of a long Advent, the shorter days and endless nights. This is the season for all of us who need that extra hour of darkness, preferably under a blanket near the Christmas tree, to feel the immensity of what we’ve gained and what we’ve lost.

My hope and prayer is that this Advent devotional will be a way for you to make the very act of waiting, holy. And as we anticipate Christ’s birth together, may we experience the stubborn hope of Christmas, joy in the midst of sorrow, a love that knows no bounds, and a transcendent peace amid a world on fire.

Jesus can’t be born soon enough.

Onward together,

Kate





WEEK 1

*Christmas
is Not
Enough*

“
*Christmas
isn't just a day.
It's a frame
of mind.”*

—KRIS KRINGLE
IN MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET

01

Hope When it's Bleak

Some memories are worth holding as something you can taste, and you'll soon see why.

A couple of years ago, at the first sight of snow, my then six-year-old son Zach ran outside screaming. I mean, screaming.

"Oh hello snoooooow!! Welcome to my life!"

For a boy who has grown up in mild North Carolina winters, the first snowfall in Winnipeg, Manitoba, felt extra magical.

I was also aware that it was not a small miracle to be there, at my mom's house, making banana fritters with caramel drizzle, ice cream, and extra sprinkles (per Zach's request).

We have this little tradition that when the first snow sticks on the ground, we MUST make donuts that very night. In Canada, the snow falls and stays far beyond its welcome—oh I don't know, UNTIL JULY. So we make an effort to celebrate before we get tired of all this cold and don't feel very celebratory any longer. So every year, we continue this little ritual, even from North Carolina, just as snow (or at least frost) comes again, and thank God, the banana fritters.

But not long ago I was mourning the life I thought I would never come again... and I wrote:

*There is nothing generic about a human life. When I was little, to get to my bus stop, I had to cross a field that had so much snow my parents fitted me with ski pants and knee-high thermal boots that were toasty to forty degrees below zero. I am excellent in the stern of a canoe, but I never got the hang of riding a bike with no hands. I have seen the northern lights because my parents always woke up the whole house when the night sky was painted with color. I love the smell of clover and chamomile because my sister and I used to pick both on the way home from swimming lessons. I spent weeks of my childhood riding around on my bike saving drowning worms after a heavy rain. My hair is my favorite feature even though it's too heavy for most ponytails, and I still can't parallel park. There is no life *in general.**

When a pandemic or disease or grieving a loss shrinks the walls of our lives, we can begin to believe that hope has been lost. That the lives we had before are over. That we may never again experience the joys and dreams and horizons we once assumed were infinite. That there is nothing left to celebrate.

Yes, things have changed. Yes, life looks different and our limitations are so much more obvious. Yes, we are lonely and sick and hungry for a taste of normalcy. But today, there is no life *in general.* Praise God. There are only fritters.

Speaking of, my sweet mom, Karen, gave me permission to share her recipe for Banana Fritters and Caramel Sauce, in case you want to start this tradition yourself. Or keep it up, if you already started it last year. It will be for you a tiny moment to celebrate that yes, life has changed. But no, it has not taken everything.

Banana Fritters with Caramel Sauce

INGREDIENTS

DIRECTIONS

Caramel Sauce

1/3 cup butter
1 cup brown sugar
1/3 cup water
1 tbsp. cornstarch
1 and 1/2 cup heavy cream

Make ahead. It stores for a week in the fridge.

Combine all 5 ingredients in a medium saucepan. Heat and stir on medium-high for 5 to 10 minutes until boiling and thickened. Makes 1 and 1/2 cups sauce.

Banana Fritter Batter

1 cup all-purpose flour
2 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp baking soda
1 and 1/4 cups water
2 quarts cooking oil
3 tbsp. flour
4-5 bananas

Combine into a large bowl:

*All-purpose flour, Baking powder, baking soda
Make a well in the center.*

Pour in water. Whisk until smooth.

Heat cooking oil in a pot or deep-fryer.

Add flour into a smaller bowl. Cut bananas in 3-4 inch chunks. Coat them in the flour, and then dip each piece in your batter.

*ice cream and sprinkles
for serving.*

*Deep-fry, in 2 to 3 batches, in hot (350°F) cooking oil for 3 to 5 minutes until golden brown.
Remove and place on paper towels to drain.*

Serve with caramel sauce, ice cream, and extra sprinkles.

02 *Waiting is Our True State*

The world has changed again under our feet. We continue to grieve the losses. Our collective and continuing vulnerability. The strange awareness that recovery is slow, uneven, and unjust. The rude awakening that the way things are, is not the way things are supposed to be.

And in the midst of this uncertainty, we trudge into the season of Advent. Twentieth century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) wrote, *“Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.”* He penned these words in a letter to his parents, while he sat in prison, jailed for his resistance efforts against Hitler’s regime.

After receiving his doctorate in Berlin, Bonhoeffer attended African American churches in the United States where he began to consider the proper Christian response to injustice—a curiosity that came to bear when confronted with the new Nazi regime in his home country of Germany. He was a brave and open opponent of Hitler’s plans for racial persecution and euthanasia of the helpless. When the Nazis took over the German Protestant churches, Bonhoeffer and others formed the underground Confessing Church to train pastors and conduct services free from fascist ideology. In the midst of this turmoil he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, where he contrasts “cheap grace”—grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate – with a costly grace that requires contrition and submission to Jesus.

Bonhoeffer was in the United States when the Second World War broke out in 1939. His friends urged him to stay in safety but he

said: “I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was recruited by the Abwehr, the military intelligence bureau which contained cells of anti-Nazis. There he helped in the escape of Jews and served as a contact between the German resistance movement and the Western Allies. In 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned, first in a military prison, then a Gestapo cell, and then in Flossenbürg concentration camp. While waiting for his trial and execution, Bonhoeffer wrote widely. These letters and papers were smuggled out of prison, and from them comes these reflections on the meaning of Advent:

“Celebrating Advent means being able to wait. Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. It wants to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot.... For the greatest, most profound, tenderest things in the world, we must wait. It happens not here in a storm but according to the divine laws of sprouting, growing, and becoming.

Just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely with-

stand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.”

His letter to his parents continues:

“We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us.... I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have.”

Bonhoeffer and fellow resisters were executed in April 1945, just weeks before the end of the war.

Advent isn't just a season in the Christian calendar. Advent is a state of being. So over the next four weeks, we are going to explore what it means to live in hopeful anticipation during a season of suffering and fear and uncertainty. When we just don't quite know when it's going to be okay, Advent reminds us of the discipline of hope.

“God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment.”

— DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

03

The Feast Day of St. Andrew

In the Church Calendar, certain days are set aside for honoring Saints and celebrating their lives, and in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions these are Feast Days. The first of our Advent saints is St. Andrew, which is appropriate because he was the first person to follow Jesus and the first to bring others to him. For this reason the Church has placed his day at the beginning of the Christian calendar—Advent Sunday is the Sunday nearest to St. Andrew's Day. I am all in favor of a feast day in the middle of Advent, a party in the middle of our longing and our not enough. And as a historian, I look to the lives of Saints not just like figures in a stained-glass window, but as people whose lives still speak.

So what does St. Andrew's life say to us?

He is a strange one. He's like the friend in high school you vaguely remember, but only as that guy that the teacher always called by his brother's name. He would have been George, 'the quiet Beatle.' Andrew is only mentioned 12 times in the Bible, and was often referred to as Simon Peter's brother. And because there is so little known about him, there is a lot of legend.

It is said that Andrew preached the Christian message widely after the Resurrection. He is said to have visited what is now Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and Greece where he was martyred in 60 C.E. during the reign of Emperor Nero. Tradition says that Andrew did not deem himself worthy to die in the same way as Christ, so he was crucified on an X-shaped cross instead, a symbol seen on the flag of Scotland, of which Andrew is the patron saint. Andrew is also the patron of Russia, Cyprus, Barbados, and Romania. He is seen as the protector of fisherman, rope workers, singers, pregnant women, and those suffering from fever.

What we do know for certain is that Andrew was one of the original apostles, in fact he was the first to be called. Andrew was a young fisherman from the village of Bethsaida whom Jesus called from his boat and net to become a "fisher of men." The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon Peter and tell him, "'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41). Andrew is the friend, the brother, who drags others to Jesus. And, as you may know, his brother Peter became the rock on



BONUS ACTIVITY:

Your Work is Your Calling

which Christ's church is built. Andrew is the disciple who drew the attention of Jesus to the boy with the basket of loaves and fishes, which provided the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. He is the one who points to things needing attention. He was present with Christ at the Last Supper and the Mount of Olives. Andrew had a front row seat for the life of Christ.

Are you feeling it? The way that Andrew stayed in the background, but was in the foreground of what was important? He was the link between Jesus and the suffering that could be alleviated. The hungry that could be fed. The lost that could be found. Andrew the Obscure was the first to be called, but made himself the last to be noticed.

Are you living a hidden life? There's a good chance you could be one of those on the inside track, doing work that is so precious to God that it is never subjected to the garish light of public view. If you're an Andrew, you are living out of the deep center of the plan to make all things new.

What does it mean to be called to something? What if that job wears you thin? What if you think you've aged out of your vocation? I spoke with the Reverend Dr. Will Willimon about what to do when the roles we play cost us more than we're willing to pay and how aging invites us to take a new look at our purpose.

Listen to my conversation with Will on "Your Work Is Your Calling" at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

"I think one of the challenges of the Christian life is to realize that the life we're living is not our own," says pastor and professor Will Willimon.

Is this one of the challenges of your life? If so, how are you experiencing that challenge?

04

Light in the Darkness

Zach still helps me light the Advent candles on the wreath each Sunday. It's a tradition, created by a German pastor in the 19th century as a way to teach kids about the coming of Christ. We flick off the fluorescent lamp in our living room and let the darkness sink in.

In Hamburg, Germany, in 1833, Johann Hinrich Wichern opened the "Rauhe Haus," the Rough House, which sheltered orphaned or neglected children. Every night of Advent, he told them stories, prayed, and lit a candle. To accommodate the candles a wheel-shaped chandelier was built, around which evergreens were twined. Visitors and supporters were impressed by this display and the custom spread, but those who imitated it reduced it in size to four candles, one for each week of Advent.

Many churches and homes mark the progress of Advent by lighting one additional candle a week until on the final Sunday when all four are alight. Three of these candles are purple or violet (penitential colors) while the one lit on the third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday) is the pink of rejoicing. After Christmas, these candles are often replaced with white ones.

The candles represent the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, and it was once customary for someone named John or Joan to be first to light them because John the Baptist at the River Jordan was the first to see the fire of divinity in Jesus (John 1:29-34), and John the Evangelist began his Gospel by referring to Jesus as the Light (John 1:1-5). The wreath is an ancient symbol of victory, while the greenery represents the everlasting life.

As I explained the practice all over again to my still very wiggly eight-year-old, I am struck by the contrast of light and dark during the Advent season in particular.

In our era of artificial street lamps, incandescent light available at the click of a switch, and glowing blue and red dots blinking from every appliance, we forget just how dark winter is, when the sun seems so pale and far away and the nights are long.

Our ancestors knew this darkness intimately. In December after sunset, they locked the doors, shuttered the windows, and tucked in early. Their folktales warned them that as Christmas drew near the spirits of darkness began to range more actively, furious at the

approach of the Christ Child. Witches, werewolves, and evil forces are abroad in the night seeking to harm humans, steal children, and destroy their livestock. Ritual steps were taken to keep witches from coming down the chimney or to keep monsters out of the home. In Scandinavia, families often slept together for protection on Christmas Eve, the peak of evil's power.

Darkness seems to always carry a bad reputation. Whether literally or metaphorically, it represents the unknown. The scary. The avoid-at-all-costs. But perhaps there are things we can't learn under blazing artificial light that we can only learn in the dark. It takes being outside at night to squint for the stars. Or flipping off the light so Zach can watch candlelight dance. (He did seem terrifyingly enamored by the flame.)

But darkness will never take us by surprise. We know that we are born into a broken world, that violence and sin are daily constants in life on planet Earth, and that it took a hideous death of an innocent man to free us. We also know that there is an inexhaustible source of brightness and warmth in the person of Jesus who first appeared to us as a baby in a manger two thousand years ago.

The arrival of Jesus was preceded by a light in the heavens that guided the Magi, and was hailed by an old wise man in the Temple as the appearance of "a light unto the Gentiles."

Christ became our light in the darkness of this world. Thanks be to God.

05

*A Blessing
For the
Advent
of Hope*

o God, these are darkening days, with little hope in sight.

o God, help us in our fear and desperation. anchor us in hope!

God have mercy. Christ have mercy.
Spirit have mercy.

“let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.”

—John 14:1

GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.

blessed are we with eyes open to see the suffering from pandemic danger, sickness and loneliness, the injustice of racial oppression, the unimpeded greed and misuse of power, violence, intimidation, and use of dominance for its own sake, the mockery of truth, and disdain for weakness or vulnerability—and worse the seeming powerlessness of anyone trying to stop it.

blessed are we who ask: where are you God? and where are Your people—the smart and sensible ones who fight for good and have the power to make it stick?

blessed are we who cry out:

o God, why does the bad always seem to win? when will good prevail?

o God we trust You, for we know You and love You. for You o Lord, are the One who seeks out the helpless, lifts them on Your shoulders, and carries them home

no matter how broken they are, or what wrong they have done.

o God, seek us out, and find us, we your helpless people, and lead us out to where hope lies where your kingdom will come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

for You are the anchor dropped into the future —our future.

GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.

open your hands as you release your prayers. then take hold of hope. as protest.

“hold fast to the hope set before us which we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm—this Jesus, who has gone before us into the inner hiddenness of all things.”

— Hebrews 6:19, a paraphrase

Amen.

06

Long Expectations

Longing is the experience of feeling the lack, the recognition, that things are not as they should be. This is the feeling of Advent. During Advent, Christians prepare for the great celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. And they do it through the practice of waiting, the practice of extended hope.

Come, thou long expected Jesus Born to set thy people free From our fears and sins release us Let us find our rest in thee Israel's strength and consolation Hope of all the earth thou art Dear desire of every nation Joy of every longing heart.

— Charles Wesley, 1745

This longing is not like the inimitable saudade of Portuguese and Brazilian culture, a word that is difficult to translate but represents a kind of deep pining for something that may never be, and perhaps never was. The longing of Advent is for the Messiah that has come and will come again.

In Advent, we are surrounded by the awareness that this posture of waiting—of longing—is our ever-present reality. Waiting and longing for hope, love, joy and peace. For all those beautiful and elusive things that we can sometimes taste—reminding us that God is good—but that have not come to completion.

Ancient Franciscan monks expressed this longing in a wondrously tender chant based on Isaiah 45:9 that in Latin is called *Rorate Caeli Desuper*: “Drop down dew, ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain down the Just One.”

The final stanza of the chant says:

Be comforted, be comforted, my people: thy salvation cometh quickly: why art thou consumed with grief: for sorrow hath estranged thee: I will save thee: fear not, for I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer.

The promise of the coming and longing we feel is sung in Advent carols and hymns, because sometimes song is the best way to express it. We anticipate with joy the release

that is coming for all people, and for the utter redemption of the whole earth. We see it enacted every year as winter releases its hold and spring enacts the annual transformation, the bursting forth of tender green leaves spring forth from dry branches, the bees that search out the honeyed lips of blossoms that fill the world with color.

Christina Rosetti's poem and Gustave Holst's beautiful tune gives this feeling such tender voice. It is a poem that is perfect for Advent, because it slides together the two realities we experience—the perfection that comes down to us as a baby in the bleak mid-winter of our souls. The absence of peace, yet the exquisite certainty of its coming.

Advent recognizes the absence of peace, yet the exquisite certainty of its coming.

In the bleak mid-winter Frosty wind made moan; Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow. In the bleak mid-winter Long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him Nor earth sustain, Heaven and earth shall flee away When He comes to reign: In the bleak mid-winter A stable-place sufficed . The Lord God Almighty — Jesus Christ.

So, my dears, this Advent season, may we learn to wait in hope, trusting that the God who was born two thousand years ago will come again.

07

Practicing Hope

When the early church chose December 25 as the date to celebrate the Nativity, they must have been aware of the powerful symbolism of midwinter, when the seasons turn, when darkness begins, at last, to diminish.

In one of the early medieval antiphons sung on the seven evenings before Christmas Eve, Jesus is hailed as “O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol iustitia” – “O, dawn of the east, splendor of light eternal, sun of justice.” We still sing in our carol:

O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by thine advent here, And drive away the shades of night And pierce the clouds and bring us light.

That is why light is so much a part of the Advent season.

Today, let's practice hope by lighting a candle together. It can be part of your own Advent wreath, but any candle will do. As the days grow darker and nights grow longer, we need to practice the act of hope, of lighting candles in the darkness, of anchoring ourselves to the tiny flicker of light that promises of God's enduring presence.

Pray this prayer as you light your candle:

God of all hope,

You break into our world as an infant wrapped in cloth, lying in a feeding trough (Luke 2:7).

A birth that sends a blaze of glory lighting up the fields (Luke 2:9) and filling the night sky (Matthew 2:9).

You are the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5).

When things feel bleak, when hope feels lost, may we remember this:

During the longest of days and darkest of nights, your never ending light shines still.

The dark is not dark to you. You are hope. You are light. And we are not alone. All hope is not lost.

May this small flicker remind me of your unending presence, warming my heart and lighting my way.

Amen.

So Happy Advent, my dears. May we all experience a little courage in the dark, short days of winter—knowing that this is the season when the brightest light of all breaks forth.

And may this season also prepare us for the coming of Jesus in his glory, a second appearance of blazing light that will take us all home, where our tears will all be wiped away, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.

Goodbye darkness. Hello light.

“Out of the silence, Music. Out of the darkness, Light. Out of uncertainty, Promise. Hope was born that night.”

— AUTHOR UNKNOWN



“

*Blessed is the
season which
engages the
whole world in
a conspiracy of
love.”*

— HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

08

Costly Love

Christmas is all about togetherness and no one understands that more than the Hallmark Channel. As everyone who is also tracking the Countdown to Christmas with the Hallmark Christmas app knows (please don't tell anyone), nothing complicated is ever supposed to happen. In a movie that could be called "Christmas, Christmas Back Again," travelers may accidentally stumble upon the town of Evergreen and be swept up in a holiday romance for the first time after the death of a spouse, but the handsome widow will fall head-over-heels with zero signs of residual trauma or lingering grief. ALL GOOD! Their children are very eager to find a new mom and drink hot chocolate while having a very extended conversation about the next intergenerational Christmas community dance.

There is something so compelling about these tidy storylines. Predictable. Trustworthy.And, frankly, an escape for many of us living with crippling pain, grappling with our estranged families, and reckoning with lives that haven't turned out like we thought they would.

As much as I love the Christmas Nostalgia Machine (AND I DO!), we don't usually get a lot of permission to say the following undeniable truth: the fragility of the people we love makes Christmas layered with a lot of different feelings.

Love. Nostalgia. Grief. Worry. Joy. Exhaustion. Loneliness. Want of more cookie-making (or eating).

Especially for those in caring professions or serving as caregivers.

Right now is still an exhausting time to be a nurse or doctor, work in a hospital, serve as a teacher, social worker or pastor, or take care of the people we love. The need is simply too great. And the cost of caring is sometimes too much to bear.

We live in webs of love and obligation and pain and joy. So as we are scribbling out the last Christmas cards and trying to figure out who gets the Christmas cake (UGH! WHY IS IT SO GROSS AND MADE ANNUALLY!), let's send a little goodness and light to the people who are carrying love on their backs.

Will you pray this prayer with me?

God of compassion and love, we offer you all our suffering and pain. Give us strength to bear our weakness, healing even when there is no cure, peace in the midst of turmoil, and love to fill the spaces in our lives. Amen.

-from Service of Prayer for Healing, The Iona Abbey Worship Book



BONUS ACTIVITY:

Sometimes Love Can be Delivered

Think of five people that you know who are in a caring profession or serve as a caregiver.

Offer them acknowledgement and gratitude today.

1. Write them a note of thanks and send it through the mail. Perhaps include the prayer from above.
2. Send them a gift card for take out or groceries or coffee.
3. Drop off treats or a care package at their doorstep (socially distanced, of course).

Let's remind these beautiful people again, that their love and sacrifice has not gone unnoticed this Christmas.

09

The Huron Carol

What if your everyday world was a little bit holy? Let me give you an example.

Every year, I give a lecture that includes a little story about Jean Brébeuf.

He was born in France in the late 1500s, and he entered the Society of Jesus, which is a priestly order known for being unbelievably careful students of the people that they are going to evangelize. I always like to read my students the diary entries from these Jesuits and their great practical tips like “if you start canoeing, people will expect you to keep canoeing.” Or, “if someone offers you something to eat, eat all you can without complaint.” I mean those are just great life lessons all around.

As a young priest, he was sent to the Great Lakes area to work among the Huron people. He learned their language. He actually ended up writing a dictionary so that later linguists will know a lot about this incredible tribe. But my favorite part is this.

He wrote songs about when Jesus was born, Christmas songs about what it would be like if Jesus was born as a little Huron baby. They are songs we still sing in Canada today. And my favorite is the “Huron Carol.”

It has all of these lovely details, like instead

of shepherds, it is the wandering hunters who heard the angels—sent by The Great Spirit to sing over the baby king wrapped in a robe of rabbit skin. And instead of Three Wise Men, there are traveling Elders who kneel before him bringing their gifts—not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but fur, beaver pelt, and sunflower oil from the tall waving flowers that Brébeuf must have seen nearby.

There’s actually a really adorable version that my mom taught us which begins, “‘Twas in the moon of winter-time when all the birds had fled, that mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead...” that I was always pretty good at.

For Brébeuf, Jesus didn’t have swaddling clothes, he’s a little papoose, a baby in one of those little leather backpacks that Indigenous moms would wrap their babies in.

Brébeuf looked around and wondered, what if everything that is holy isn’t somewhere else? What if it’s right here? What if these are things that God would use if God showed up and needed a blanket?

I hear a lot from people who need to invent their own ways of being holy in difficult moments, and I just want to say, YES. What an excellent idea. Even when it’s messy. Perhaps even in those bad manners you detect

at the grocery store, you see a bad day instead of a bad attitude. Secretly hesitating that one little step to let them get ahead of you in line, the irritating become a little bit holy. There's rest in that. There's something else to pay attention to.

When you slow down, you can sip the beauty in the everyday.

And notice that light that shines through your baby's fingertips. Or to delight in the sneakiness of the pink of dawn that catches hold in patches of sky you thought the sun couldn't reach. To know, when you pick up that shell, you really do hear the ocean. In the color and texture of ordinary vegetables, and the magic in kitchens everywhere when heat and oil and spices collide. And what if it's actually true most of the time, that less can be more. Or that faster is not better.

Sometimes people worry that they are being irreverent. That things that are divine and beautiful shouldn't be everyday things. But I think that this is exactly how we know that our biographies are special. It's all in the details.

So this week, if you need a minute to feel God interrupting your life, don't worry too much about making it sacred. Maybe you just need a hot minute in the car in the Target parking lot to remember that the very stuff of your life is holy.

**Within a lodge of
broken bark**

**The tender Babe was
found,**

**A ragged robe of
rabbit skin**

**Enwrapp'd His
beauty round;**

**But as the hunter
braves drew nigh,**

**The angel song rang
loud and high...**

**"Jesus your King is
born, Jesus is born,
In excelsis gloria."**

— AUTHOR UNKNOWN

10

The Feast Day of St. Nicholas

December 6 marks the feast day of that saint most closely associated with Christmas, St. Nicholas of Myra. Though Nicholas is viewed in the 21st century as a quaint figure of legend, he was once seen as, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, the most powerful of all saints. His reach is such that he is the patron saint of Aberdonians, apothecaries, Austrians, bakers, barrel-makers, boatmen, Belgians, boot-blacks, brewers, brides, butchers, button-makers, captives, chandlers, children, coopers, dock workers, Dutchmen, druggists, firemen, fishermen, florists, folk falsely-accused, Greeks, grooms, haberdashers, judges, Liverpudlians, longshoremen, merchants, murderers, newlyweds, notaries, old maids, orphans, parish clerks, paupers, pawnbrokers, perfumers, pharmacists, pilgrims, pirates, poets, rag pickers, Russians, sailors, sealers, shipwrights, Sicilians, spice dealers, thieves, travellers, and weavers. Hundreds of churches are named after him all across Europe, even as far as Greenland where the first cathedral erected by the Viking settlers was dedicated to him.

Now that would be a great Roadside America stop— world's largest replica of the Greenland Viking St. Nicholas church with real ice and snow!

Nicholas's story is big enough that he would easily have become a modern-day celebrity. Born in the eastern Roman Empire in what is now Turkey, in the late 200s, Nicholas was imprisoned in the last wave of anti-Christian persecution under the emperor Diocletian. After his release following the accession of Constantine he became bishop of Myra (a town now known as Demre). He is said to have attended the important Council of Nicaea in 325 where he gained a reputation for feistiness by smacking the heretic Arius. Yet this irrepressible Nicholas came to represent the power of love and secret acts of generosity that we rediscover each year at Christmas.

An enormous body of legends has grown up around his generosity and miracles. He seems to have had the supernatural power of flight and of bilocation—being in two places at once. His habit of rescuing ships in per-

il on the sea meant that medieval sailors on the Mediterranean would not venture aboard a ship without “Nicholas loaves” —bread that could be thrown overboard to miraculously calm stormy seas. The two most lasting stories of Nicholas both concern children. The saint, having heard that a poor man’s daughters might have to become prostitutes, secretly provided three bags of gold to provide each one with a dowry and find a husband. In another tale, Nicholas visited an inn where the evil innkeeper had murdered three students and pickled them in brine. Nicholas detected the crime and raised the boys to life again; for this and similar miracles, he becomes the patron saint of students and children.

By 1100, his festival is associated with the Christmas season. His feast day became linked to the custom of the Boy Bishop who rules certain churches—right up until the December 28, Feast of the Holy Innocents. This is quite a long period of reversal of power, another symbol of the social inversion that Jesus came to bring. Children had been so long been considered dispensable, the custom of giving gifts to children on St. Nicholas’s day was yet another reminder that Christ came to the weak and vulnerable, and this practice soon spread across Europe.

By the sixteenth century, German children hung out their stockings for him to drop presents in just as he had dropped bags of gold to the poor man’s daughters. At the same time in England, children were told that he came in through the window.

Interestingly, the sixteenth century that saw the Protestant Reformation made war on the cult of saints, and this resulted in Nicholas being replaced as Gift-Bringer, first by the Christ Child and then by secularized figures resembling a darker shadow of St Nicholas,

such as Pelznickel, Belsnickel, or Knecht Ruprecht. The gift-giving time was also moved from December 6 to December 25 or New Year’s Day. Among Protestant countries, only the Netherlands maintained its devotion to Nicholas, known there as Sinterklaas.

This figure of Sinterklaas inspired early nineteenth-century Americans in New York City to develop a new Gift-Bringer, Santa Claus. It is Santa Claus who is exported back to Europe to provide the model for Gift-Bringers such as Father Christmas, the Weihnachtsmann, and Père Noël. Today, Saint Nicholas, clad as a Catholic bishop complete with crozier and mitre, and companions such as Zwarte Piet still bring gifts on the eve of his feast to children in the Netherlands and other areas of Europe. In fact, his popularity has renewed because he stands for old national customs in the face of an Americanization of the European Christmas.

But in whatever form, St. Nicholas or Santa Claus still comes, and the conspiracy of love continues. Parents sneak in the dark to fill stockings to delight their children, and I just have to wonder....is the good St. Nicholas of Myra looking on, and does he smile to see the legacy continue? A story of the unquenchable joy and mysterious power that is at the heart of selfless love.

11

The Season of Giving

In an Advent season like this one where conversations about getting together may be fraught and complicated, opportunities for generosity and social connection may be harder to come by. Yet, we still long for touchstones that can anchor us in our traditions of giving and receiving. Maybe maybe it's time to let history expand our awareness, and show us some traditions we could adapt to make this season a little brighter, a little sillier perhaps, just for fun.

Ever since the Middle Ages, people have used the Christmas season to go door-to-door soliciting charity in return for a song or good wishes for the coming year. In Alsace in 1462, visitors dressed as the Magi are recorded as having gone about on the eve of Epiphany. Sixteenth-century English sources noted the custom of the Wassail Wenches on Twelfth Night. In Yorkshire, lads used to go “Christmas ceshing” —knocking on the door and shouting “Wish you a Merry Christmas, mistress and master.” Similar English begging visits were called “gooding,” “doling,” or “mumping” and often took place on St Thomas Day. Plough Boys go begging on Plough Monday, while the Silvesterklausen tradition in Switzerland takes place on New Year's Eve. Klöpflgehen occurs in south Germany throughout Advent. In North America,

belsnickling and Newfoundland mumming sought hospitality and free drinks more than charity. In Brazil, the Reisados solicit donations for the celebration of Epiphany—but I'm thinking that could sound a bit too much like telemarketing unless there were costumes involved.

These visits were framed in such a way that a blessing was always exchanged for money or hospitality. In those cases where a gift was not forthcoming curses were often uttered. (Do not try this at home, kids.) In pre-revolutionary Russia, carolers sang kolyadki, songs of blessing that could turn into wishes for a bad harvest or sick cattle if little gifts were not forthcoming. (Wait a minute!) On the Greek island of Chios, groups of children revile the housewife who has run out of treats to pass out on Christmas Eve: they make uncompimentary remarks and wish her cloven feet. (Whoa there I think treat-shaming is a bridge too far.)

In central and eastern Europe, the Star Boys still parade, though now the money collected is often directed toward the developing world. In the Austrian village of Oberndorf where “Silent Night” was first written, boatmen who were unable to work during the winter months used to go about at Christmas soliciting donations to see them through un-

til spring. The custom died for a time when modern social welfare attitudes were adopted by the government but it was revived in the twentieth-century in a different form. Now groups of men walk round with their lanterns, bells and a Christmas crib atop a pole collecting money for charity. Even though the true begging visit has declined, Christmas is still the season for encouraging charity as shown by the example of the Salvation Army with its street-corner kettles.

Some social historians distinguish between those visitors who are seeking charity—such as the wassail wenches or those doling or mumping on St. Thomas Day—and those after only a spot of hospitality in return for good wishes—these latter they call “luck visits.” Customs such as wassailing or Newfoundland mumming would fall into this category. More recently, there is the phenomenon of random acts of kindness, or pay it forward.

History has plenty of examples where Christmas has awakened in people a renewed desire for conviviality and increased generosity. What adaptations might you come up with, to spark fun, make someone’s day, and test out the maxim that it is more blessed to give than to receive?

BONUS ACTIVITY:

Extraordinary Empathy

Would you give an organ to a total stranger? How about run into a burning building to save someone you don’t even know? If you saw someone on the side of the road and they looked like they really needed help, would you stop? Some people go to incredible lengths to help strangers. That isn’t just empathy, that is extraordinary altruism. So what makes a person risk one’s own wellbeing for someone else? I spoke with researcher Abigail Marsh about the use of fear, what it really means to be brave, and how we can all learn to better belong to one another.

Listen to my conversation with Abigail on “Extraordinary Empathy” at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

What’s the most extraordinary example of extraordinary altruism you’ve ever experienced?

11

A Blessing for the Advent of Love

o God, we are waiting, we are long-
ing for You, o Lord of Love!

Jesus come!

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

*“and John said, ‘Are you the one
who is to come, or shall we look for
another?’”*

— Matthew 11:3

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

*“He reached down from on high and
took hold of me; he drew me out of
deep waters.”*

— Psalm 18:1–36

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

blessed are we who look to You o
Christ! and wait for the fulfillment
of that love which is higher, deep-
er, fuller than anything we have ever
known.

blessed are we in our incomplete-
ness,

this place where we are overwhelmed
who hear you saying, I come! despite
all,

I come bringing true life and health
and healing and love that
never ends.

blessed are we who see You, o Sav-
ior! the light that dawned so long
ago in that dark stable, shining in the
perfection of love given, love re-
ceived, enfolding us into the heart of
Your beauty and glory and bliss.

blessed are we, looking into Your
face, into the gaze of the beloved, the
One who knows us best of all, and
calls us His very own.

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

receive this, your inheritance: love
has come for you.

*“I have come that they might have
life, and that abundantly.”*

—John 10:10

Amen.

13

A Cry and A Call

What do we say when we express wonder beyond words, when we look intently. When we address someone or something that fills us with love and joy in its presence, and intense longing in its absence?

It is more of an exclamation than a word. We say O!

O is the smallest word in English, yet it is packed with meaning. It perfectly expresses both the cry and the call of Advent in its very essence. It is the rapturous lament that expresses both longing and joy in perhaps the most beloved of all Advent hymns:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O! is both exclamation and invocation. It cries out to God who is unknowable, yet loved and understood mysteriously through the poetic symbolism in each verse.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free Thine own from Satan's tyranny; From depths of hell Thy people save, And give them victory o'er the grave. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high, And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh; Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come And open wide our heav'nly home; Make safe the way that leads on high, And close the path to misery. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Adonai, Lord of might, Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai's height, In ancient times didst give the law In cloud and majesty and awe. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.

The words are taken from the medieval O Antiphons, written in the 8th century to be sung in the week leading up to Christmas: O Wisdom (O Sapientia), O Lord (O Adonai), O Root of Jesse (O Radix), O Key of David (O Clavis), O King of Nations (O Rex Gentium), and O come, Emmanuel, whose meaning is: God with us.

O is the powerful word that could cross the barrier from Latin into English because it perfect for expressing urgency. It leans into what follows next—to the person addressed. Each verse of the hymn cries out for Jesus to come, and expresses the hope that is fixed on the fulfillment of Advent longing, for love, joy and peace.

The word O invites to look. And look long. Toward the Beloved, toward the source of all love.

For the time being, at Advent, Jesus' resting place is in the womb of a young Jewish girl, Mary. So imagine Mary slowly making her way to Bethlehem, the City of David where she and Joseph must travel to be registered. She is carrying within her the source of all life, the one who will give himself for the salvation of the world. *"He will silence the uproar of the nations. The kings of the nations shall bow down. Come quickly and deliver us."* (paraphrase of the 19th C translation of the Radix Antiphon by Abbot Guéranger)

And the kings of the nations do bow down. Before the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

**O! invites us
to look and
look long
toward the
Beloved,
the source
of all love.**

14

Progressive Nativities

If, in December, you were to drop into the Winnipeg home of my mom and dad, Gerry and Karen Bowler, on the wind-swept plains of Manitoba, you would be greeted by a house in the full throes of Christmas. If you are lucky you will have arrived on an aromatic day when the oven was full of gingerbread men or Scottish shortbread or Bavarian stollen. An Advent calendar hangs on the door; there are Advent candles and a pewter Advent wreath on the table. Figures of the world's Gift-Bringers are on every flat space: Santa Claus, Father Christmas, the Yule Lads of Iceland, a German Belsnickel. And everywhere there are nativity scenes, also known around the world as crèches, presepios, portals, beléns, nacimientos, Weihnachtskrippen, or pesebres.

For over a thousand years, churches, town squares, palaces, and homes have been adorned at Christmas with replicas of the stable scene in Bethlehem where the Baby Jesus was born. Here are some of the variations that my parents have collected:

Pride of place is given to the traditional miniature barnyard scene, featuring Mary and Joseph hovering over a crib, surrounded by animals, townspeople of various occupations, Roman soldiers, and the odd angel with the Magi off in the distance but getting closer every day. Most of the figures are about 3" tall but there is no uniformity of culture or period. There is a Franciscan friar rubbing shoulders with a shepherd whose cloak blows in the mistral wind of southern France. There are fishermen, housewives, merchants, a carved wooden warthog from South Africa and, hiding discreetly in the

back, a caganer figure from Catalonia performing a rude act of nature. When Zach first saw this, he knew it was pretty edgy, and wanted to take it out of the manger and "frow it far away."

The tradition is, that only at midnight on Christmas Eve will the Babe be placed in the manger. Only on January 6, Epiphany, will the Wise Men reach their goal and adore the Christ Child. (The well-equipped nativity scene organizer will have two sets of Magi: one travelling, and one worshipping.) Many of these figures have been found on the Via San Gregorio Armeno in Naples, that street filled with shops selling only nativity scenes.

In the late 1700s the Austrian emperor Joseph II outlawed large outdoor nativity scenes, so his people developed a number of smaller

crèches for family use indoors. Here you will see two such examples from that country: a brightly-coloured low-relief framed carving of the Holy Family and an amazing miniature town of Bethlehem made inside a heart-shaped chocolate box.

From Colombia there is a colorful jeep holding the migrating Holy Family, with all their possessions including a television piled on top. From Peru there is a folk art retablo, a painted case that opens to reveal Mary and Joseph and peasants in traditional Andean costumes with the usual ox and ass in the stable replaced by llamas. There is a large Salvadorian crib with a baby and parents looking as if they had been made by Picasso in his Cubist phase and a tiny Guatemalan nativity scene in an egg. On the Christmas tree hangs an abstract manger scene in crystal made by Gerry's grandmother.

My Dad covets a recent ironic version entitled "The Hipster Nativity" where the Wise Men arrive bearing Amazon boxes on Segways, Mary and Joseph are taking a selfie, the stable is solar powered, a shepherd is posting the scene to Instagram and the sheep are given gluten-free feed, but so far my Mom and good taste have stood in the way.

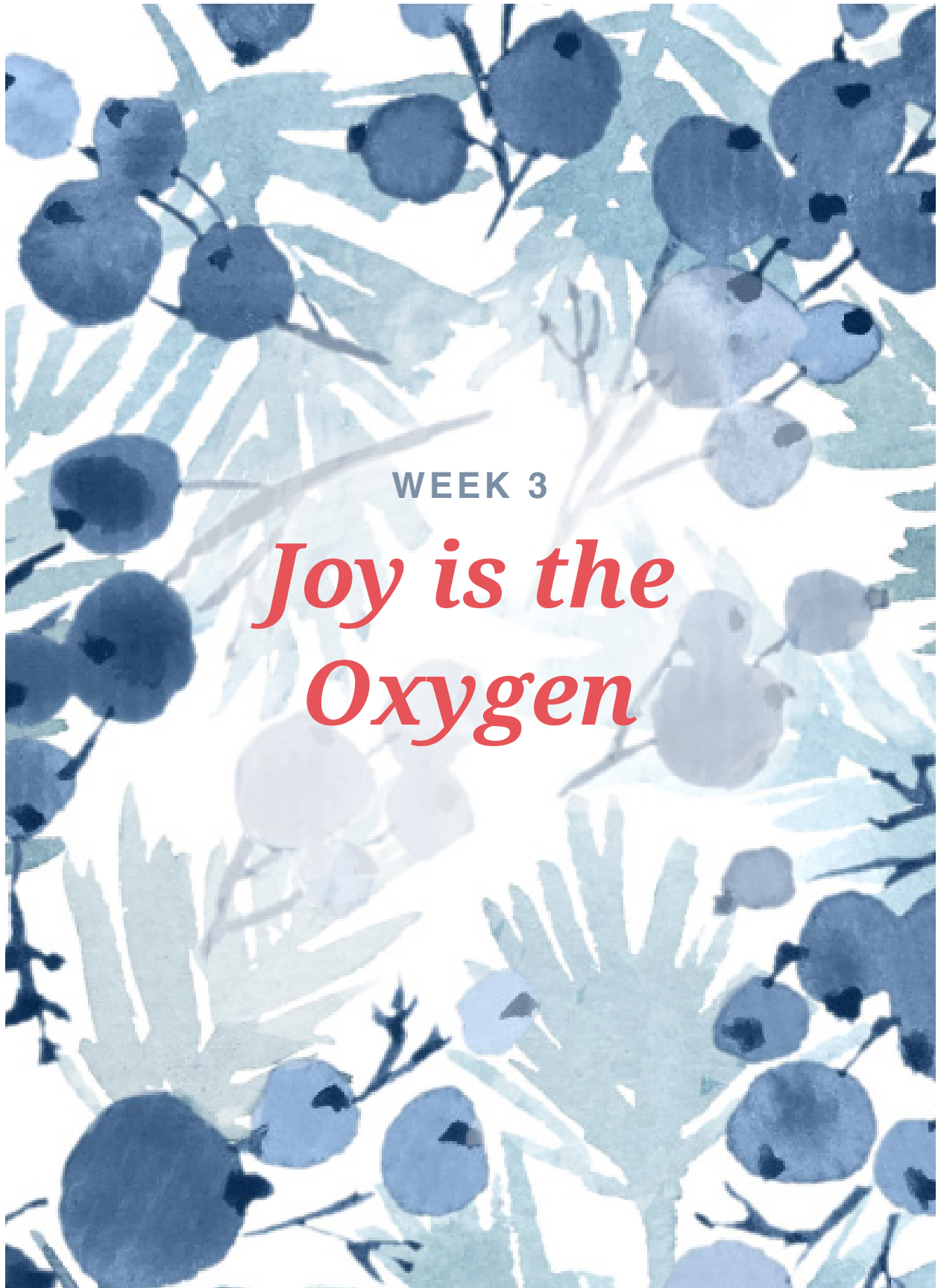
BONUS ACTIVITY:

Progressive Nativity

Maybe you would like to practice what is called The Progressive Crèche in your household this year. This nativity scene builds each day we get closer to Christmas Eve. If you don't have a crèche already, get creative. Make the figures out of paper or tree trimmings instead.

Here are the rules for a Progressive Crèche: • Add villagers and animals gradually • Kids can add straw for every good deed done in Advent • Holy Family and Magi should slowly approach • No Baby Jesus until Christmas midnight • No Magi near cradle until January 6

Re-read Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2. Notice how this practice invites you into intentionality behind the Christmas scene.



WEEK 3

*Joy is the
Oxygen*

“

*When they
saw the star,
they rejoiced
with exceeding
great joy.”*

— MATTHEW 2:10

15

Metabolize Joy

Breathe in. And breathe out. You are here.

And I am here too with you somehow, in writing this.

And again together, we are sounding out this strange phrase: joy is the oxygen. I first heard it when I spoke with Gary Haugen, the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, an organization working to eradicate human trafficking around the world. They do heavy work, rescuing kids from sex trafficking in developing countries.

I asked Gary what was his secret. He has been doing this hard, beautiful work for nearly thirty years. How has he not burnt out? Switched to a lighter job? He told me, "Joy is the oxygen for doing hard work." For him, it signified a kind of alchemy where hard things become not only possible, but sustainable when he finds opportunities for joy. It is spending time with his kids or getting in a rigorous exercise. But that's his story, not yours.

Yours is the story of the particular place you find yourself right now, at the intersection of all that has been done and all that has yet to be done. It is in this space, this moment, that I want you to light a candle.

The match strikes the wick and flame rises. The wax melts, vaporizes, and combines with oxygen in the air to sustain a steady glow. The candle diminishes, yet heat and light increase.

Perhaps your candle is pink. If it is part of an Advent wreath and this is the third Sunday, then it might be. And if so you would be joining churches all around the world in lighting what is called the joy candle. And it is not white like all the other candles on the Advent wreath. But pink. The color of

blushes and of pleasure. The color of sheer delight in fulfilling the purpose for which it was made.

Here and now, at the intersection of all that has gone before, and all that is yet to come, I would like to say to you that there is something for which you were made. It is the thing that seems to make you forget yourself even as you become more and more alive in it. Something rises up in you and you get an inkling that maybe, just maybe, this is why you were born. It is the oxygen that makes it possible for you to keep going. That is joy. You are fortified by it. Because you are a being that was made to metabolize joy.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, metabolism means "the chemical changes in living cells by which energy is provided



BONUS ACTIVITY:

Joy is the Oxygen

for vital processes and activities.” And what more vital activity is there than to do what you were made to do? It’s why you are alive.

In this season of so many limitations, so much sorrow, and so much perplexity, perhaps today the reason you were made is to make soup. Just soup, out of what’s left in the fridge. And eat it in peace. Or share it with someone, or give it away.

What is the thing you will think, or speak, or make, or do, or simply be that gives you joy? What precise part of you is more alive because of it? What can shed light and warmth in the darkness of this darkening time?

Whatever it is, it is yours. And in the doing or being there is joyful amazement where strangely, it is possible to feel more alive because there is a mystical greeting going on. It is the awareness that you are in relation to the God who made you. On purpose.

**“You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your
right hand there are pleasures forever.”
—Psalm 16:11**

Certain people decide to make other people’s pain their own. Gary Haugen, founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, is one of those people. I spoke with Gary talk about how even in the darkest places, joy and goodness can be found.

It’s hard to keep caring about someone else’s pain when we aren’t caring well for ourselves. Gary’s remedy for compassion fatigue is joy. Do you have a regular discipline for recovering joy into your life? What’s your biggest joy infusion?

Listen to my conversation with Gary called “Joy is the Oxygen” at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

16

Sugar and Torture

The season of joy runs on two things: sugar and torture.

Growing up, my sisters and I built gingerbread houses and decorated them so thoroughly that the powdered sugar dust lingered in the curtains for weeks. We built palaces of icing and cookie sheets. But then the horrible reality set in almost immediately as we recalled The Great Law of Advent.

1 Candy = 1 Day

We could only eat our houses one...piece...at...a...time...one...day... at...a...time.

It was torture.

Family rules (like English Common Law) were developed over time to legislate our concerns.

New rules included:

01

Gingerbread houses must have structural integrity. Icing is glue, not its own wall.

02

No eating your sibling's candy.

03

No licking other people's candy.

04

You are not permitted to immediately devour walls that "cave in." Too many walls had caved in for too many dubious reasons.

On glorious Christmas morning, we would gorge ourselves on stale gingerbread sheets. One year, we built our houses in November—so early that we had to blow all the dust off the roofs of the houses. Then we ate it anyway, of course.

For most of my young life, I counted every day of Advent in gumdrops. Then I became an adult and I forgot how good it can feel to wait.

Advent is technically a time of waiting and preparation for the baby Jesus. The church waits in anxious expectation, repenting of distractions in order to focus on the miracle of a prophecy fulfilled. Advent and Lent share the same liturgical color: purple. Christians wait in the dark, just for a little while, because we know there is new life, resurrected life, at the end. We wait patiently in the purple time.

When you are in the season of terrible, time is heavily weighted. You experience waiting differently. Sometimes the waiting is torture, but oftentimes it isn't. I feel attuned to every emotional and sensory facet of each kaleidoscopic day. I don't want the Christmas rush. I want the Advent anticipation to go on forever.

A still, dark house is one of the best places to be in Advent. When I can't sleep, I creep out to the living room to be alone with our Christmas tree. I sit in the stillness of my Lego-strewn living room, lit by the twinkly lights, and breathe in the lengthened seconds. Zach will be stumbling out of bed any moment, dressed in Minecraft or Lego pajamas, ready to start another gumdrop day.

May your Advent be as sweet and completely absurd.



BONUS ACTIVITY:

Gingerbread Megachurches

The first year after my diagnosis, my mom bought me a gingerbread kit with firm instructions to “Make a mega-church, sweetie.” And so I did. So every year, I make a glorious candy congregation for a charismatic man (or WOMAN). She knows how to run an empire. Everyone is welcome as long as the marshmallows don't crash through the ceiling. (Toban does NOT let me spray paint indoors, otherwise the roof would always be gold. THANKS A LOT TOBAN.)

Pull out some gingerbread supplies and make your own mega-church. But please, again this year, please, please tag me in any photos so I can see. I hope this tradition brings you as much absurd joy as it brings me.

17

The Feast Day of St. Lucia

In Winnipeg on December 15th, the sun sets at 4:27 in the afternoon and won't rise until around 8:30 the next morning. That's 16 hours of darkness, but in even more northern countries like Sweden, the dark lasts even longer. No wonder that Nordic lands love their Lucia Day tradition where children wearing candle-lit crowns process solemnly and carry food (or yet another candle). That's what we need in the dark—the comfort of food, warmth, beauty and light. And learning, or so Merlin said in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, “The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn something.” The curiouser the better.

So when I heard the famous Lucia Day processional song, sung by white-robed Nordic children with candles in their hair, I was very curious. It's the famous Neapolitan song “Santa Lucia.” So how did an Italian song get so Nordic?

Saint Lucia or Lucy was a Christian virgin of Catania, in Sicily who was martyred in the persecutions of the late third century. After various travels, her relics ended up in Venice where the song “San- ta Lucia” is part of the repertoire

of singing gondoliers to this day. Because her feast day fell on December 13, the date of the winter solstice before calendar reform, her legend became entwined with the midwinter festivals of various parts of Europe. 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, she represents light and the promise of the renewal of spring. Some scholars say that the Swedish version of Lucia is actually a descendant of the Christ Child gift-bringer, who was the Protestant Reformation's replacement for St. Nicholas. The Christkindl in Germany, where many of Sweden's Christmas customs originated, was often depicted as a white-clad young girl and it is said that this figure was adopted by Swedes in the west part of the country to personify the celebrations that traditionally began on December 13. By the early twentieth century, Lucia was a hugely popular figure all across the country.

In Sweden, 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.

There is a dark side as well to the Lucia figure. Because the depths of midwinter are believed to be a time of increased demonic activity, Lucia is sometimes identified with witches or monsters. In parts of Germany, she is the Lutzelfrau, a witch who rides the winds and has to be bribed with gifts; in some parts of central Europe, Lucy takes the form of a nanny goat rewarding good children and threatening to disembowel the bad. (Oh dear!) In Iceland, she is identified as an ogre. The night before her feast day is therefore held to be a good time for ceremonies to drive away evil spirits with lights, noise, and incense. At midnight, Austrians believed that a special light, the Luzieschein, appeared outdoors and would reveal the future to those brave enough to seek it out.

Primordial fears rise in us in the darkness, and again, what we most need is the comfort of food, warmth, beauty and light. What comforts will you add to your Advent celebration of the coming light?

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

— JOHN 1:5

18

Christmas Like St. Francis

The most remarkable man of the Middle Ages was born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone to a prosperous merchant and his wife in central Italy in 1181. His father nicknamed him Francesco ("Frenchy"), and so the young man became known to history as Francis of Assisi.

After living the carefree life of a rich man's son, Francis underwent a series of religious experiences that caused him to renounce his father's wealth and to embrace a life of poverty and service. He begged for his keep, tended to lepers, and preached a message of love and repentance across the local countryside. Despite his radical approach to property and the environment, Francis attracted large numbers of followers who were eventually organized in the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscans, for men) and the Order of St Clare (for women).

The tender heart of Francis naturally found expression in his attitude toward Christmas. In 1220 in the town of Greccio, Francis set up the earliest living nativity scene. (From "Grecio" we get the word "crèche".) 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, a donkey and an ox, a manger full of straw, and a tiny baby to bring home the long-ago events in Bethlehem and make the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus real to the ordinary people.

He prepared a manger, and brought hay, and an ox and a donkey to the place appointed. The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. St. Francis stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King. Being unable to utter His name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem. A certain valiant and voracious soldier, Master John of Greccio, who, for the love of Christ, had left the warfare of this world, and become a dear friend of this holy man, affirmed that he beheld an Infant so marvelous sleeping in the manger, Whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both



BONUS ACTIVITY:

Feed the Birds

his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep.

The living Nativity scene is a long-enduring tradition that is still carried out 800 years later.

Another Christmastide example set by Francis that is still observed is the custom of giving animals a special feeding on December 25. Saint Francis, who loved the birds and fishes enough to preach the message of salvation to them just in case they had souls, was a leader in urging good treatment to the animal kingdom. He begged farmers to give their livestock extra food at Christmas in memory of the ox and ass between whom the Baby lay. "If I could see the Emperor," he said, "I would implore him to issue a general decree that all people who are able to do so, shall throw grain and corn upon the streets, so that on this great feast day the birds might have enough to eat, especially our sisters, the larks."

To this day, Norwegians will set out a julenek, a sort of Bird's Christmas Tree, to provide grain for our winged friends. English farmers may wassail their cattle with an anointing of cider, and Polish farmers on Christmas Eve give their cattle an oplatek wafer and bless them with the sign of the cross.

In honor of St. Francis, take some bread outside to feed the birds and squirrels, bunny and deer. Give your pets an extra special treat.

As you do, consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:26-28, 34: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ...Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

What do you glean from God's tender care of the creation around us?

19

*A Blessing for
the Advent
of Joy*

o God, we are waiting, we are longing
for You, our everlasting Joy!

o come to us, be with us, make our
joy complete!

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

*“now is your time of grief, but I will
see you again and you will rejoice,
and no one will take away your joy!”*

—John 16:22

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

*“You make known to me the path of
life; You will fill me with joy in Your
presence.”*

—Psalm 16:11

blessed are we who wait for You in
the desert of our longing and isolation,
in the wilderness that is this our
present struggle.

blessed are we who have sat down,

to wait at the still point between desire
and expectation. we have quieted
our souls to listen, for Your words are
life to us.

blessed are we who have this settled
purpose: we are collecting ourselves,
we are getting ready, we clearing away
the space to receive You, for we have
glimpsed something of Your glory, Your
power, Your joy, and our hope is in You!

o blessed Babe of Bethlehem, You
came for this one loving purpose:
that Your joy may be in us, and that it
might be complete!

**GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE
MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.**

take the cup of blessing. with each
sip, drink in the assurance that joy is
for you, too.

*“with joy you will draw water from the
wells of salvation.”*

—Isaiah 12:3

20

Joyful Waiting

Six little kids squished together on a couch, smiling and singing —that’s my new favorite way to listen to a carol. They sang happily, with the settled confidence of those who know good things would be coming—Christmas! And all that entailed: presents and special treats and holidays and adventures with cousins perhaps. The tune they sang had a lilting resemblance to a rowdy children’s game or skipping rhyme, though it was an 18th century French Advent carol, “O Come Divine Messiah!” The composer was the Abbé Pellegrin. Although he was called Abbot, he didn’t distinguish himself greatly as a monastic in the order he joined, for he would rather write for operas. In fact it was said of him:

“He was Catholic in the morning and in the evening, idolater, He supped at the altar, and dined at the theatre.”

No matter! The skipping rhythm and boisterous style of his music was the perfect vehicle to express the pre-Christmas happiness of this squished group of carolers.

And the text holds even more. It is full of hopeful expectation, greater than what a child’s

mind can fathom. Those of us who have lived longer know how deep the world’s sadness can be, how strong the grip of tyranny and injustice, and how great is our need for news that good might ultimately triumph.

There should be a word in English for this juxtaposition, the poignant linking of these two kinds of Advent waiting—the innocent confidence of a child in happy expectancy, and the longing of the whole sad earth enraptured as it waits for ultimate cosmic joy. WHY IS THERE NOT A WORD FOR THIS? (She shouted.) This contradiction in conjunction. We need one word to capture the precise overlapping of what is at once simple and complex, assured and yet inconceivable. About how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. Like the parents who sneak downstairs to place gifts under the tree, lovingly chosen, wrapped and hidden away for a time. How like our merciful God who has all ready for us, the fulfillment of the ages. In Christ.

The words Advent carol cry for this beautiful completion to begin:

“O Come, divine Messiah! The world in silence waits the day when hope shall sing its triumph, and sadness flee away.”

And when we hear this repeated refrain sung so innocently, so confidently, our own desires rise up and aspire to the heights of child-like hope, ever more confident in the truth of it. That sadness will “flee away” at the dawning of grace that is signaled by the coming of Jesus to earth in peace, in meekness, as a little child.

O come, divine Messiah! The world in silence waits the day When hope shall sing its triumph, And sadness flee away.

Dear Savior haste; Come, come to earth, Dispel the night and show your face, And bid us hail the dawn of grace.

O Christ, whom nations sigh for, Whom priest and prophet long foretold, Come break the captive fetters; Redeem the long-lost fold.

You come in peace and meekness, And lowly will your cradle be; All clothed in human weakness Shall we your Godhead see.

O come, divine Messiah! The world in silence waits the day When hope shall sing its triumph, And sadness flee away.

This kind of joy is huge. It is bigger than all the sadness the world has ever seen or known. It brings all at once, freedom, forgiveness, justice and grace in the coming of that One, the One in whom all goodness is contained and reflected, in that face.

21

Practicing Joy

Today is a day for channeling Ebenezer Scrooge who said: “I will honour Christmas every day in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

Practicing joy is an exercise of attention or proclamation. There are some things that are true—about ourselves, the world, or others—that feel too absurd to be true. The wily wisdom of advent, however, suggests that the very absurdity of these hard-to-believe things may in fact testify to their veracity.

For example, it’s absurdly true that love is a bad investment, if gain is all you’re after. But nevertheless Christians count on a different equation to be true, that if we try to hang on to our lives we lose them, but if we

give them for the sake of Jesus and all He stands for, we will save them. Advent is a time to proclaim these unseen certainties by being restlessly creative in celebrating them, proclaiming them.

For example, when I visit a ridiculous road-side attraction for no reason except to be with a friend and leap for joy that we did it, that’s my way of saying isn’t this an amazing life? When I make my gingerbread house in the shape of a mega-church decorated with gold-sprayed pretzels, that is my way of being absurdly grateful. Joy is in the particulars.

What’s yours? What can be your own particular expression of joy that is at the heart of loving with the soft beating heart Jesus gave you.

The COVID-19 Pandemic (The Sequel) has forced us to make many adjustments in our lives and it will surely interrupt many long-standing Christmas traditions. Trips may be more difficult, loved ones may have passed away, or may not be able to be seen, parties may not be possible, and a new sense of loss will hit us this December. But if old customs can’t be practiced this year, and you can’t think of how to celebrate Christmas, maybe it’s time to reintroduce some really old Christmas practices that can be creatively adapted.

01

Stir-up Sunday. This is an English tradition that requires that the Christmas pudding be stirred up, with each family member taking a turn—some insist that the stirring must be performed clockwise (to represent the journey of the Wise Men from East to West) and with eyes closed while making a wish. Christmas pudding is traditionally made with 13 ingredients to symbolize Jesus and the 12 Apostles. For those homes that do not make Christmas pudding the tradition can be adapted to any holiday dish that requires a bit of stirring.

02

Read a book together out loud. Charles Dickens' masterpiece *A Christmas Carol* is a short novel, full of ghosts and wonderful ideals, which can easily be read out loud in family-size bites in the evenings leading up to Christmas—even on Zoom. Or on Christmas Eve, you could read the "Twas the Night Before Christmas," or any beloved poem or story.

03

Watch some really good Christmas movies. Scrooge, the 1951 version of *A Christmas Carol*, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *Rare Exports*—a little 2010 touch of fright and humor from Finland, *Elf* (2003), Dr. Seuss' *the Grinch* (2018), and the original Chuck Jones animation of *the How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1964). And to be quite definite, *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie. Or gather round a truly sappy Hallmark Christmas movie and adlib throughout. It could work!

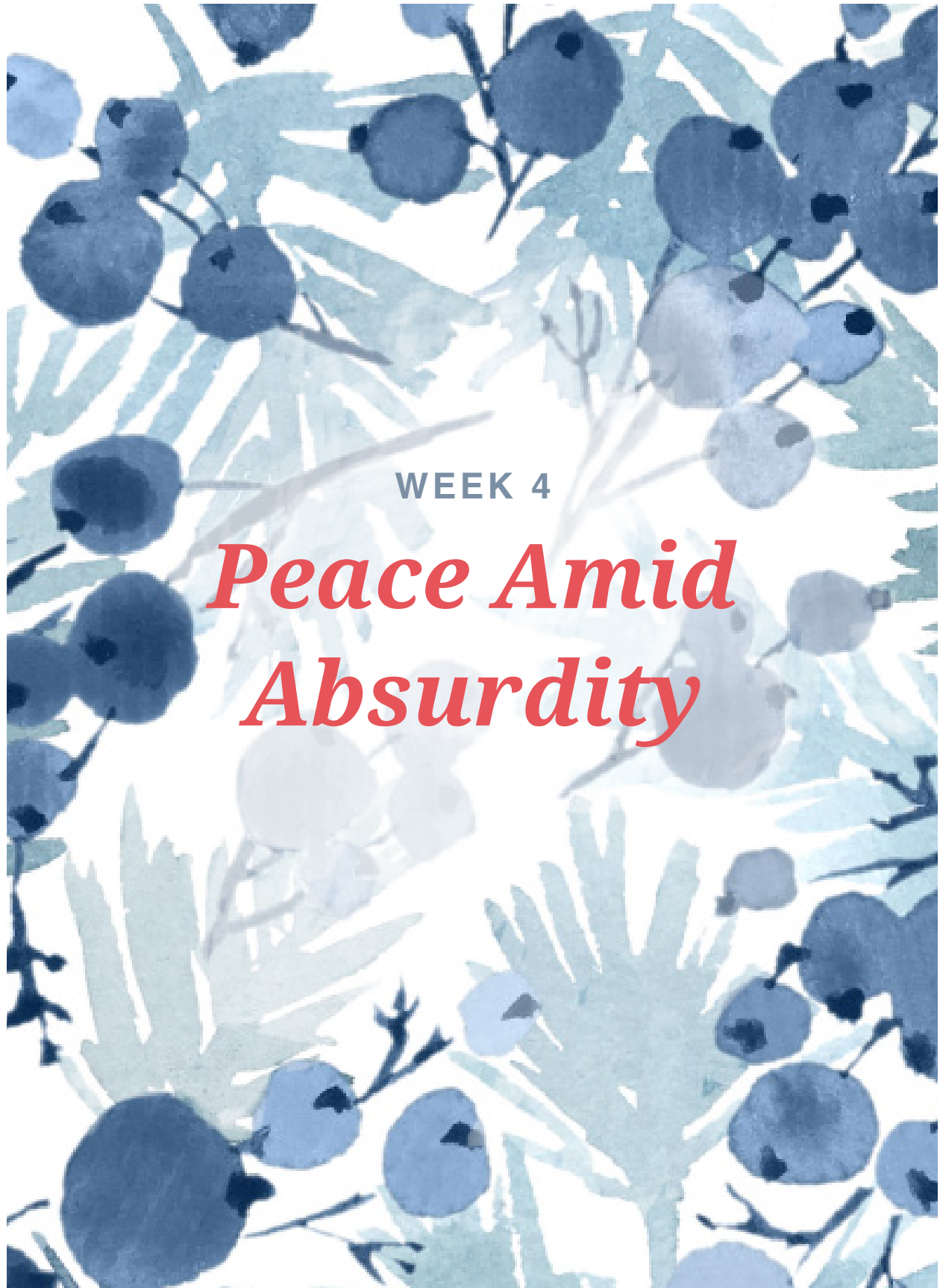
04

Keep in Touch. The use of Christmas cards sent through the mail has declined in recent years thanks to the ease of email but nothing compares to a personal message in one's own handwriting. This is also a way to support charities such as UNICEF who publish seasonal cards.

Your expression of Christmas joy carves out a space in the world. And it has your name on it.

Will you join me?

**Practicing joy
is an exercise of
attention
or proclamation.**



WEEK 4

Peace Amid Absurdity

“

*I am not alone at all,
I thought. I was never
alone at all. And that, of
course, is the message
of Christmas. We are
never alone. Not when
the night is darkest, the
wind coldest, the world
seemingly most indifferent.
For this is still the time
God chooses.”*

— TAYLOR CALDWELL

22

Surprised by Peace

While we were doing something else, God came. While the Roman world was intent on domination and conquest, entertainment and excess, God chose to arrive as a baby born in dire circumstances in a backwater town. Quietly, inexorably, comes God's self-revelation. It resists categorization, and everything about it is a surprise. Mary is a surprise. Jesus is a surprise. It breaks prevailing social paradigms, and shatters forever the logic of empire. An angel tells a girl she will be a part of a great reversal, and suddenly, she recognizes the huge truth of it and can't contain her joy. Mary overflows with praise that God "has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:52-53).

Let us read with fresh eyes Luke's account of Jesus' birth, and see the wondrous absurdity of what unfolded, in the time of God's choosing:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee whose name was Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, and the virgin's name was Mary. And going in to her and said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." And she was greatly distressed at his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And see: you will conceive in your womb and will bear a son, and you shall declare his name to be Jesus. This man will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob throughout the ages, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, as I have intimacy with no man?" And in reply the angel told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence the offspring will be called holy also; he will be called Son of God. And look at your relative Elizabeth: she also conceived a son, in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who had been called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let happen to me as you have said." And the angel departed from her.



BONUS ACTIVITY:

A Lesson in Belonging

This is the theophanic unveiling, the presence that brings peace and calm. Truth is like that. It comes with the blessing of peace. What at first seems confusing and wrong, suddenly makes sense. Then comes the sigh. The body knows truth when it appears.

This is the wonder of Advent. We learn to see in the new light of God's absurd self-revelation in Jesus, which the world can't recognize or comprehend. It turns the world completely upside-down from everything we once thought or knew. But as we read the story, it reads us. We realize that our lives were upside down before, and now we've finally found our feet. We were living inverted, curved inward lives, and then God shows up and invites us into something more. Peace in a world of uncertainty. Joy that breaks forth. Love that prepares the way. And hope that waits. Above all else, God offers a communion where we need not be alone.

It doesn't make moving through the world any easier—quite the opposite is true—but the wily wisdom that comes in Advent provides a way to live... and be... and love in an absurd and beautiful world.

We are never alone, and we can bring this presence to others this Christmas. Reach out to someone who might believe they have no one. This is still the time God chooses.

US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy embarked on a listening tour to determine what was ailing Americans. The answer surprised him. People were lonely. I spoke with Vivek about loneliness as a public health crisis and how the experience of disconnection affects our ability to weather life's most difficult storms.

Listen to my conversation with Vivek on "The Loneliness Epidemic" at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

We begin and end with so much fragility—like little jelly beans. And yet the great irony is that the thing that affords us the greatest ability to connect—our fragility—is the thing we're most afraid to share. What's something small that helps you overcome this fear when you're struggling to connect with others?

23

Las

Posadas

We need to celebrate! It's been almost a whole year of loss, really a whole year of Advent and longing for Christmas. There's a tradition in Mexico that embodies the freedom and celebration we crave—the ability to walk to a neighbor's house, to enjoy music and food and drink together. And it is all done as a ritual to recognize that Mary and Joseph needed shelter and were turned away. They needed the welcome that would meet their needs in dire circumstances.

In sixteenth-century Mexico, missionary friars wanted to give their followers a Christian alternative to midwinter celebrations. In 1586, Augustinian prior Diego de Soria began the custom of the posadas (“lodgings”), a nine-day ritual beginning on December 16, re-enacting the search of Joseph and Mary for a place to stay in Bethlehem.

It begins with a procession assembling after dark. Led by a child dressed as an angel and two more children carrying images of Mary and Joseph, folk march through the streets singing songs and playing musical instruments to a house chosen for the night's ceremony. There they knock and beg entrance for two weary travellers; they are ritually rebuffed from those within playing the cruel innkeepers of Bethlehem. The dialogue may go like this:

Joseph: Heaven, I beg you for lodging, for my beloved wife cannot walk.

Innkeeper: This is not an inn, so keep going. I cannot open—you may be a rogue.

Joseph: Don't be inhuman: Have mercy on us. The God of the heavens will reward you for it.

Innkeeper: Go on now and don't bother us, because if I get angry I'll give you a thrashing.

Joseph: We are worn out coming from Nazareth. I am a carpenter, Joseph by name.

Innkeeper: I don't care what your name is; let me sleep. I already told you we shall not open up.

Joseph: I'm asking you for lodging, dear man of the house, just for one night for the Queen of Heaven.

Innkeeper: Well, if it is a queen who is asking for it, why is she travelling at night and so alone?

Joseph: My wife is Mary the Queen of Heaven and she's going to be the mother of the Divine Word.

Innkeeper: Are you Joseph? Your wife is Mary? Enter pilgrims, I did not recognize you.

Joseph: May God repay your charity, gentle people, and thus heaven heap happiness upon you.

Innkeeper: Blessed is the house that shelters this day the pure Virgin, the beautiful Mary.

After this exchange of traditional phrases, the procession is invited inside where they will gather in front of the family Nativity scene and sing carols, followed by refreshments. On December 24, the posadas conclude with a big party for the families who have participated in the processions or played the innkeepers. Piñatas are smashed by the children, hospitality flows, and then all may go off to the midnight mass. This custom has spread throughout the American southwest and Central America.

In the Philippines, the equivalent is the panuluyan, believed to have been introduced from Mexico during the 18th century. In the Austrian Alps, an old custom called the Josephstragen (“Carrying Joseph”) called for a parade of boys to carry a statue of St Joseph from one house to another on the evenings before Christmas.

It’s an unusual thing to have an actual ritual that gets at the discomfort, the rejection that is at the heart of the events that led up to Jesus’ birth. What if we too could name and welcome our needs in this most unusual of Advent seasons? What if we could lament our pandemic losses together, express our longing and find community safely somehow, through our shared experience?

As I think about this, the darkest time of the year, I realize we are people of traditions and rituals. See how you might adapt one of your most cherished Christmas practices, and sense God’s welcome and presence and comfort, just exactly where you are right now.

24

The Feast Day of St. Thomas

No Christmas could be complete without attention to those who are less fortunate than we. Thomas was one of the original apostles of Jesus known in the gospel of John for doubting the resurrection until he could see for himself that Jesus was truly alive. Thomas is said to have traveled and evangelized in India, where he met and converted the Magi who had followed the star to Bethlehem. St. Thomas is among the many Christian saints martyred because of their faith. His feast day, December 21, is connected to a number of Christmas-tide customs around the world

In England, it was traditionally a day of licensed begging for poor women who were permitted to go door-to-door to ask for alms. This custom was called “Thomasing,” “mumping,” or “a-gooding” —it was considered good for one’s soul to give. (We talked about a version of this a couple weeks ago.) Thus, this song sung by the indigent women:

Well a day, well a day, St. Thomas goes too soon away, Then your gooding we do pray For a good time will not stay. St. Thomas gray, St Thomas gray, The longest night and shortest day Please to remember St. Thomas’s Day.

The custom died out in the early twentieth century as charity became more institutionalized and attitudes to begging hardened. Many registered charities in Britain, however, observe St. Thomas Day by choosing to make their payments then.

In Central Europe, St. Thomas Day was a time for driving out demons by making loud noises, cracking whips, letting off firearms or ringing bells—all while wearing horrible masks—or by using incense and holy water and saying the rosary. St. Thomas himself was said in Bohemia to ride at midnight in a chariot of fire to the graveyard where he met the spirits of all the dead men named Thomas; there he blessed them and disappeared as they returned to their graves.

In other parts of Europe, it was a time for schools to break up for the Christmas vacation, an opportunity for social inversion. “Thomas Donkey” is the title given to the last to wake up or who comes late to work on Thomas Day in some parts of Germany. In Norway, it was once the custom for all preparatory work for the Christmas season to be completed by St. Thomas Day. A two-week’s

supply of wood for the stove had to be ready, else the saint would come and take away the axe; all baking and brewing had to be finished, lest a string of kitchen mishaps take place.

Of all the practices associated with Christmas, at its core is charity, charity, charity—the kind that gives in a way that always preserves the dignity of others. It's the response of a heart that is grateful, a heart that keeps itself soft because, like St. Thomas, it has encountered the Lord of love.

“Let us remember that the Christmas heart is a giving heart, a wide open heart that thinks of others first. The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history, because it has meant the pouring into a sick world of the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for almost two thousand years...

Underneath all the bulging bundles is this beating Christmas heart.”

—GEORGE MATTHEW ADAMS

25

An Intentional Advent

Christmas is almost here, and you will already have read that December 23rd is called “Little Christmas” in Scandinavian countries. What if a holiday could be invented that really was a lot like Christmas, but without the added pressure? (I can feel the intense interest growing...)

Christmas puts a lot of pressure on women who bear the brunt of Christmas labor. What about changing up the big meal so it is something differently delicious, without all the things. All the things that have always been done, because they have always been done. (Does anyone actually **like** Grandpa’s turnip recipe anyway?) Maybe try to support local businesses by ordering in.

What’s another way you can add more intentionality to your Advent practices? Here are some more old Christmas traditions that could spark a sense of renewed life in your Advent and your Christmas to come:

Remember the dead.

In northern and eastern Europe, the Christmas season is the time to remember family and friends who have passed on. Rekindle their memories by visiting the cemetery and decorating the graves. In Kenora, Ontario, citizens set out thousands of ice candles on Christmas Eve in the local cemetery. Some bring extra lights and seek out old graves or ones not visited by family to light them. Some cultures set an extra place at the table for their ancestors, or put their pictures on display.

The Jesse Tree.

A popular motif in medieval art, particularly in stained glass, was the depiction of the earthly ancestry of Jesus as a tree growing from Jesse, the father of David. A spectacular example of this is the twelfth-century Jesse Tree window

from the Benedictine abbey of St. Denis in France. In the twentieth century, the notion of a Jesse tree as a symbol of Advent attracted a number of American artists and craftspeople. Many churches and homes now contain a tree, tree branch or banner decorated with Bible verses prophesying the coming of Jesus or ornaments symbolic of Messianic prophecies.

Sometimes the Jesse Tree is decorated piece by piece in the fashion of an Advent calendar and in some churches a Jesse tree is used to collect winter clothing for the poor with members attaching hats, scarves or mittens.

Christingle.

Also known as a “Christ-light” service, this is a ceremony popular in English Protestant churches, often involving children. Originating with the Moravian church in the eighteenth century, these services are held during the Advent season and combine collecting money for charity with the image of Christ as the light of the world. A feature of the service is the Christingle or Christ-light, a candle placed in the top of an orange decorated with a red ribbon and four sticks on

which are placed fruit or candy, symbolic of the blood shed by Christ for all the peoples of the world.

White Christmas

In 1914, a new type of service was introduced into some North American Protestant Sunday Schools for Advent—the “White Christmas” service, in which children were encouraged to bring gifts to be distributed to the needy. This grew to be a popular tradition in many churches and it continues to this day, collecting both canned food, toys, and monetary donations to make Christmas for the poor a little easier. In some churches, this is called “White Gift Sunday” from the custom of wrapping the offerings in white paper.

What will you keep?

This pandemic has caused the entire world to have a reset of huge proportions, and it is not finished yet. So much is in flux. Perhaps all you want to do this day is to sit quietly and reflect on a question like this: What Advent and Christmas traditions do you want to keep? Which do you want to let go of? What do you want to try for the first time?

26

*A Blessing
for the
Advent
of Peace*

O God, we are waiting, we are longing for You, o Prince of Peace.

come, desire of nations, and bring your reign over this whole earth.

GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.

“My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

— John 14:27

GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.

blessed are we who look to You and say God, truly, we are troubled and afraid. come govern our hearts and calm our fears.

blessed are we who ask You for wisdom, show us what to turn from, what to set aside. come Lord, that we might see You, move with You, keep

pace with You.

blessed are we who ask that this Advent we might dwell together quietly in our homes. come Lord, that we might be for others the peace they cannot give.

and blessed are we who ask You, Lord, to be for us the wonder that the world cannot give, come Lord! flood us with the hope and love and joy of Christmas peace.

GOD HAVE MERCY. CHRIST HAVE MERCY. SPIRIT HAVE MERCY.

alleluia, Christ has come! and will come again, in glory!

“for this is what the LORD says: I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flowing stream.”

— Isaiah 66:12

27

Heavenly Peace

Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright Round yon virgin mother and child! Holy infant, so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace! Sleep in heavenly peace!

On Christmas Eve, these are the words we sing in hushed and reverent tones, as we approach the manger. With Mary and Joseph, we gently bend over the infant Jesus and sing our adoration that is actually a lullaby, sung with loving and protective intent: “sleep in heavenly peace!”

And sometime during a Christmas service, we may have heard the words spoken that describe the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...” The name Augustus had been given to Octavian through his military might and ascendancy over his rivals, and the peace he won was called the Pax Romana. This “Roman peace” lasted over 200 years, from about 31 B.C.E. and spread throughout a vast empire. Its culture and achievements are still evidenced today in the Roman roads and walls that still stand. But this peace was won at a cost, through absolute dominance and brutal enforcement. We already know too much about such methods—capital punishment in the arena by wild beasts, the practice of decimation, and the public torture called crucifixion. It is into this world to this form of peace, that Jesus comes with His kingdom. The Pax Christi.

Silent night! Holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight! Glories stream from heaven afar, Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born! Christ the Savior is born!

The words speak peace to the world, but so does the music. Its rhythm is a specific style called a “Siciliana,” a slow lilting, rocking rhythm that in Baroque

music evoked pastoral scenes and images of shepherds and sheep safely grazing, as on the hillsides of Sicily. The Siciliana rhythm is famously used in Handel's Messiah in the aria "He Shall feed His flock like a shepherd." Again, the words and music evoke the comfort and freedom of sheep who can roam freely and eat their fill, and the tenderness and vigilance of a Good Shepherd, who watches over his sheep and guards them from harm.

The song "Silent Night" was famously written in the midst of an impending Christmas Eve calamity. The church organ broke down. The priest Joseph Mohr needed a solution. So he brought his lyrics to Franz Gruber who wrote the music for a guitar accompaniment. Surely, the song is itself a kind of Christmas miracle.

Silent night! Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light Radiant beams from thy holy face With the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth! Jesus, Lord, at thy birth!

Sleep little one, on this, the night most charged with promise and holy joy:

"For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end."

—Isaiah 9:6-7

Merry Christmas, my dears. Light a candle, one way or the other. This life will ask everything from you, but for now, there's a little something to celebrate.



CHRISTMASTIDE

The 12 Days of Christmas

Dear one,

It has been a strange season. Advent is over, and Christmas is here. But for many, it may not feel like Christmas at all. We are still waiting for miracles. We still long for life to feel normal again.

Christmastide (December 25th - January 6th) is about the gradual departure of darkness and the gentle dawning of light at Epiphany. We don't have to cram all of Christmas into one day. At Christmastide, we shed the pressure of "the holidays" and how we always do things, and take on a new, relaxed rhythm of celebration. Kinder. Quirkier. And at the same time somehow more traditional.

I didn't want to leave you in the Advent season without walking us through Christmas as well. So this year I bring you again this Christmastide Calendar for us to practice together.

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 the Christmastide move the wise men closer and closer to the manger, to

Jesus, the light of the world. On January 6th, they arrive, and the season of light begins, Epiphany. Otherwise, each day of Christmastide, do one thing less. Make space. Make it a holiday. Feel free to make them your own.

And I've added a suggested Christmas carol to listen to, some of them traditional just to stir memories, and some not so well-known or widely heard at this time of year. Sit under your tree. Let the words wash over you.

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

Onward together,

Kate

December 25: Christmas Day

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

Traditional Christmas Carol: O Come, All Ye Faithful!

December 26: St. Stephen's Day (Boxing Day)

Ideas: 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.

Traditional Christmas Carol: Good King Wenceslas

December 27: St. John the Evangelist's Day

Ideas: Spread the Gospel by being the "good news" for someone else in a small way. The good news is the light, so set aside time to light a candle, take a glass of wine or cider, and relax in the glow.

Traditional Christmas Carol: The Wexford Carol

December 28: Feast of the Innocents

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

Traditional Christmas Carol: Sweet Little Jesus Boy

December 29: Feast of Thomas Beckett

Ideas: Send an email of thanks to someone who has been a spiritual inspiration to you. Your priest, pastor, teacher, or mentor.

Traditional Christmas Carol: The Cherry Tree Carol

December 30

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

Traditional Christmas Carol: Still! Still! Still!

December 31: New Year's Eve

Ideas: 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.

Traditional New Year's Song: Auld Lang Syne!

January 1: New Year's Day

Ideas: 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.

Traditional Christmas Carol: Jesus Christ the Apple Tree

January 2: St. Basil's Day

Ideas: Think ahead to the year and write in your calendar reminders of the blessings you have been given. Write yourself a little thank you note for something you did this year that makes you glad you did it.

Traditional Christmas Carol: Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

January 3: Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus

Ideas: Say the name of Jesus reverently throughout the day as an internal "Yes" to the light coming into the world, or pray the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Traditional Christmas Carol: Huron Carol

January 4

Ideas: Preferably do something fun that involves delicious food or a yummy cocktail.

Traditional Christmas Carol: Children, Go where I send thee

January 5: Eve of the Epiphany (Twelfth Night)

Ideas: Open your saved gifts!

Traditional Christmas Carol: We Three Kings of Orient Are!

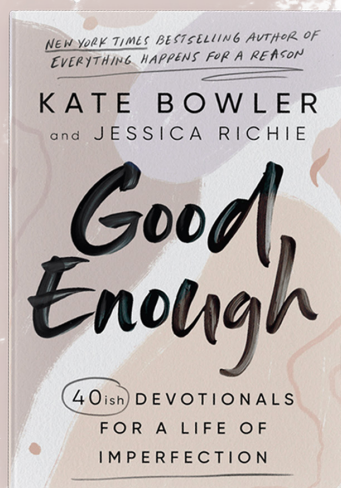
January 6: Epiphany

Ideas: Light all the candles in the house. Bring the Wise Men into the manger. Enjoy the Christmas lights one more time. Rest.

Traditional Christmas Carol: As with gladness Men of Old

January 7

Ideas: Take down the tree! Reflect on what it means to enter the season of light.



LOOKING TOWARD LENT?

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A compassionate, intelligent, and wry series of Christian daily reflections on learning to live with imperfection in a culture of self-help that promotes endless progress, from the New York Times bestselling author of *Everything Happens for a Reason* and the executive producer of the *Everything Happens* podcast

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