



bless the
Advent We
Actually Have

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

By Kate Bowler and The Everything Happens Project

Oh hello again my dears,

Here we are at the precipice of Christmas. Sounds... *ominous*? Well, that's probably because our bodies instinctively remember the knot of nervous energy that propels us through it all. The busyness. The hustle. The last-minute-wrapping. The beauty of the first snowfall (or at least the cinematic version on the Hallmark Channel). The delight of Christmas lights (after they are hung, of course). The WOULD-YOU-STOP-ARGUING-WE'RE-SUPPOSED-TO-BE-MAKING-MEMORIES moments. There are so many desires and longings wrapped up in every parcel, every must-make recipe, and must-do tradition. We dream of creating a glistening Christmas for our families or friends that makes us tired even before we're finished imagining it.



But what if we could take all those ideals and see what's underneath, at the root of it all? It's our hopes for peace and joy and love for ourselves, our people, and for our world. And we say, *God, show us again how this goes. How do we bless the Christmas we actually have?*

Perhaps we can practice blessing our *actual* lives together this Advent.

WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is a season marked by expectancy and preparation, and, you might be surprised to learn, is the beginning of the Christian calendar. In the church, the year does not begin with "New Year, New Me," but with the hopeful anticipation of the birth of a little baby who will come to make all things new. Advent lasts between 20 to 28 days (depending on the year), but it always ends on December 24th. Christmas is an entirely separate season that begins on December 25th and lasts until January 6th (Epiphany). The twelve days of Christmas (are certain songs making more sense now?) are set aside for a new kind of gentle joy in the arrival of the infant king.

Advent and Christmas are as different as different could be. One is all eager anticipation and the other joyful fulfillment. Advent and Christmas even have different music to embody these distinctions. The music of Advent ex-

presses a longing, a thirst—and the relief we will experience when it is satisfied. Take this hymn, for example, written by Charles Wesley in 1744. It looks to Jesus not only as God’s love expressed in human form at the incarnation, but to Jesus’ return at the end of time, when death will be no more:

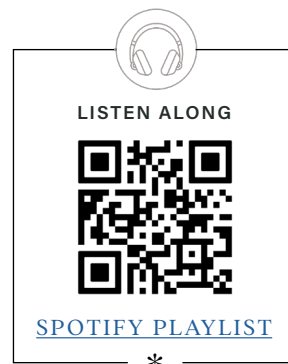
Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Advent music can embrace the hard things about life here in the not-yet, before Christ comes to restore all things—a reality we’re probably all too familiar with. And one we want to walk through, together. We’ve created an Advent playlist for you to listen to as you practice the act of waiting with us this Advent season.

The entries that follow can be used beginning on the first day of Advent (in 2023, that is Sunday, December 3rd) through Christmas Day, as we celebrate the great inversion—God coming to Earth in the form of a human baby—together. Seeing the world as it really is. Practicing hope for the coming King. Celebrating generosity and love any chance we get.

Come again with me as we draw near to all that is holy, all that is hard about Advent and Christmas. Because we can’t do this alone. And shouldn’t have to.

Bless you,
Kate



WHAT YOU NEED TO GET STARTED:

- 20 minutes each day leading up to Christmas
- Save this PDF on your device or print it out so you can doodle in the margins. Or use the link to **Bless the Advent We Actually Have** course page which is a way to access this devotional on our website every day.
- [The Lives We Actually Have](#) book of blessings (optional)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- **THE LIVES WE ACTUALLY HAVE:** This reflection guide is designed to be used in conjunction with our book of blessings, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. Each day's entry encourages you to read a blessing from our new book. Of course, you can just use this free guide by itself, but you might find the most richness and depth when used together.
- **WHAT TO EXPECT:** We've designed each day to take around 20 minutes. That includes time to read the assigned scripture, a short devotional, a blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have*, and some reflection questions. If you have extra time, there are opportunities to dive deeper into our themes and topics by listening to suggested podcast episodes, participating in some hands-on activities, watching some bonus videos, and reflecting on the songs on our Advent playlist. Zero pressure to complete everything. Just pick the options that fit whatever day you're having.
- **GROUP OPTIONS:** Like most things, Advent is better practiced together. We have created each Sunday's entry as an opportunity to practice Advent with others. This can be with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, a small group, or book club—in person or on Zoom. In that day's entry, you will be prompted to light an Advent candle. This can be an official Advent wreath you buy online (there are some cute ones on Etsy) or you can create your own. They usually include five candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white in the center), surrounded by some sort of greenery.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These are my favorite kinds of group projects. A huge thank you to our sponsors who make it possible to make resources free for you to use: The Duke Endowment and Lilly Endowment. And to my team who put this gorgeous guide together.

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For more free resources like this, go to katebowler.com/resources.

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WEEK 1

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3
- SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Bless this *Hope-Filled* Advent



“It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope.”

—POPE BENEDICT XVI

“The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.”

—HENRI NOUWEN

* <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Hope as Protest

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

—ISAIAH 40:30-31 (NIV)

Advent is a time marked by waiting. We wait for God to make all things right. For justice to be meted out. For world leaders to make the right decisions. For wrongs to be righted. For our communities to be safe spaces for the vulnerable. For our earth to heal. We wait for our lives to get easier—for us to have the financial security we need, for our relationships to be restored, for our bodies to ache less. We wait for our parents to understand us and our families to feel whole. We wait for our kids and grandkids to be healed or come back home. We wait for the grief to end.

But the waiting of Advent is one marked by *hope*. We wait with expectancy. With anticipation for the inbreaking of God to make all things new. And yet, hope can feel like a drug that must be carefully administered. Too much and we're setting ourselves up for disappointment or disillusionment. Too little and we're freighted with despair.

As we sit amidst our shattered dreams of what was not possible or what came undone, of what we have lost or of what was never healed, it is difficult to know what hope is supposed to look like...*now*. What are we hoping for exactly? How do we find real hope in the midst of all

our disappointment? How do we stay awake to the kind of possibility Advent asks of us?

Especially when we no longer have the privilege of childish dreams of sugar plums and gumdrops. We have been awakened to the reality of pain and suffering. We no longer crave niceties or easy promises. We want the really real. We need true hope.

Of course, there will come a day when we don't need to hope. Like the psalmist describes, a future will come where we will "run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:30-31). The long arc of God's love will redeem and remake the whole world—and us in it.

Hope, then, is the function of struggle. It is the realization of our limitations or of our lack of agency or of the inability for us to save ourselves and the ones we love. This kind of hope is not a wishlist sent to Santa Claus. Advent hope is gritty. It shirks all false optimism. It is hope as protest. Hope in the face of impossibilities. As writer Barbara Brown Taylor said, "whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

As we wait—expectantly—for God to break into our world, into our communities, into our lives, may we have the eyes to see, soft hearts toward others, and open hands to what God has for us now. Trusting that something new is going to break forth amid this Advent darkness.

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

For the first night of Advent, gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your parents or grandkids. Create your Advent wreath. You can purchase one online (there are some cute ones on Etsy) or make one yourself with items from around your house and yard or from the local craft store. They usually include five candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white in the center), surrounded by some sort of greenery. The greenery (be it real pine boughs or holly or plastic garland) represents life that is ever-green and growing. The Advent wreath began in 1839 in a shelter for orphans and neglected children. Each night of Advent, a German pastor named Johann Hinrich Wichern gathered the kids around him to light a candle, tell them a story, and pray. Imagine their excitement as the candle pushed back the darkness more and more, one night at a time. Any child called John or Joan would be first to help light a candle as they heard about John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus. Visitors who came to the orphanage loved the wheel-shaped chandelier and so the custom spread as churches and families adopted it, though the number of candles were eventually reduced to 4 for each Sunday of Advent, and 1 on Christmas Day.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Isaiah 40:30-31** aloud.
- Light the first purple candle and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 40) as a prayer:

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

—JOHN 14:1, NKJV

God, these are darkening days,
with little hope in sight.
Help us in our fear and exhaustion.
Anchor us in hope.
Blessed are we with eyes open
to see the accumulated suffering of 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?

God, seek us out, and find us,
 we your tired 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.

Blessed are we who cry out:
 Oh God, why does the bad always seem to win?
 When will good prevail?
 We know you are good, but we see so little goodness.

Fill me with your courage.
 Calm me with your love.
 Fortify me with your hope.

God, show me your heart.
 How you seek out the broken,
 lift us on your shoulders,
 and carry us home—
 no matter how weak we've become.

P.S. Open your hands as you release your prayers.
 Then take hold of hope. As protest.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is your favorite part of getting ready for Christmas? How in the past have you practiced Advent?
2. Do you find it easy to hope or is hope hard to conjure? If you feel comfortable sharing, what has made hope hard to hold recently?
3. What does hope feel like for you? Has there been a time when hope has felt toxic? Have you ever realized you were hoping for the wrong things?
4. What is the difference between hope and optimism? Is there room to expand or redefine your understanding of hope?



God With Us

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

—PSALM 139:7-10 (NIV)

I used to think that life was a series of choices. The college I picked. The person I chose to marry. The number of kids I wanted. The job I worked so hard to get. *Check. Check. Check.* I curated my own life until, one day, I couldn't. Until one day, tumors spread across my colon without my consent. Perhaps a death or disease or diagnosis or tragedy undid your well-made plans and took away your ability to choose the life you want, too. So often life happens *to* us. Without asking our permission (how dare it!).

When we discover we are living in the in-between of what is possible and what is not possible, we have recognized our limited agency. That small square footage where we can no longer assume EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE. Instead, we must ask, *What is possible today?* I

find that question far easier to wonder when I recognize there is no choice that escapes the promised presence of God.

During Advent, we are reminded that hope is found in an unexpected place—a tiny infant who came to face real life with us, to teach us how to live and how to hope, and, ultimately, to die for us. And he shall be called Immanuel, which means God With Us (Matthew 1:23). God with us on the beautiful days and the impossible ones. God with us as we celebrate and as we mourn. God with us as we make infinite choices or have very little choice at all. God with us when we have no other choice but to keep going. There is no place we can go that God has not already been—from the manger to the banquet table to the tomb, God is with us.

READ THIS BLESSING

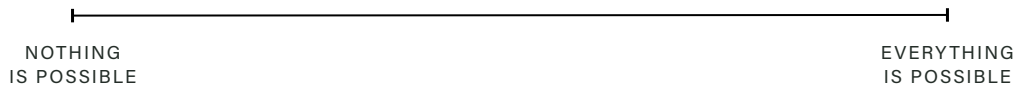
FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for the life you didn't choose (p. 188)

*Blessed are you in the tender place
of awe and dread,
wondering how to be whole
when dreams have disappeared
and part of you with them.*

REFLECT

1. How in-control of your life do you feel right now?



2. How do you experience God's presence? Do you find God in nature? In a feeling of peace? In words of comfort of hope? In the presence of a friend?
3. Do you find it easier to recognize the presence of God on good days or hard ones? Why do you think that is?

GOING DEEPER

- *Agency* describes the degree to which a person has the ability to make decisions about their life, to change it, control it, direct it. **Limited agency** is a more realistic way of understanding our limitations and what is possible. [Watch this video of Kate talking about limited agency](#) (7 min).¹
- When poet and pastor Jan Richardson's husband died, she continued to write counterintuitive blessings as a sign of stubborn hope in the face of grief and pain. [Listen to a conversation Kate and Jan had on Stubborn Hope](#) (4 min).² You can see how Jan recognized her limited agency by sometimes only living 15 minutes at a time during her times of deep grief.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDQcG77ZSX4>

2 https://youtu.be/_VfO-lkXG-g?si=e2Ur6VR4DS2pTZXD
 Full episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/jan-richardson-stubborn-hope/>



Teach Us to Pray

LORD, bear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.

—PSALM 143:1 (NIV)

When I pray, I tend to get pretty specific. Like my ten-year old writing his Christmas list, I know exactly what I want and when I want it. Maybe you do the same. We pray for loved ones to be cured. We pray for that baby we have always wanted. We pray for the money to send our kids to college. We pray for health so that we can actually enjoy our retirement. We pray for us to find our person who will be steady and get along with our friends. *You can see how quickly our prayers might become transactional:* “God, if this would happen, THEN I would be so grateful, my life would be complete, THEN I would be happy.” But what happens when our prayers aren’t answered the way we expected? When there is no cure. When the baby doesn’t come. When we don’t find our person. When our kid doesn’t want to go to college. When our spouse dies before retirement. When we expected a savior and we got a vulnerable infant. We had hoped for someday, but that someday is not today. Perhaps, it is in this exact place—a little scared, a little disappointed, a little hopeful—where we might learn something about prayer.

God is working to redeem not only your story, but the story of the whole world—both of which don’t happen on any timeline I would pick. One life, one person’s story is full of breaking and redeeming. We see this in the life of Jesus—there are times of miracle births; there is time of waiting in the wilderness. There are times of healing; there are times of mourning. There are times of crucifixion and times of resurrection. The breaking and healing of the world takes time. When we cry out to God just as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane—“God take this cup from me” (Luke 22:42)—our voice joins the chorus of the fellowship of the afflicted. And while quick solutions would be preferred, I take comfort in knowing I don’t cry out alone. And my cries do not fall on unlistening ears. So if today is not your day of wholeness or hope... let’s look around at others and see where God is working in their lives. Maybe see where we can make their loads a little lighter. Together, may we become people who look for signs of hope and act in hope while we wait.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for when you feel forgotten by God (p. 106)

God, please start it now: the promised healing, restoration, redemption. I can’t wait much longer.

REFLECT

1. What have you been expecting from God? What are your unanswered prayers... and how do they make you feel toward God?
2. What is your relationship like to prayer? Do you pray for specific things or for generalities? What do you think your way of praying says about your hopes?

GOING DEEPER

- Jesuit priest Father Jim Martin explores this topic with Kate in their conversation, “[What Good is Prayer](#)”? (37 min).¹ Listen for a rich dialogue about how we might learn to pray when we aren’t so sure about life or how God may answer.
- “Fellowship of the afflicted” is a term I borrow from Bible teacher Margaret Feinberg. Margaret realized that people who had experienced something difficult often understand things that they didn’t before. They earned their unwanted membership when their lives were turned upside down by pain, loss, or sickness. Their experiences enable them to walk alongside others who are also afflicted. It is this understanding that brings them together. Margaret and Kate are part of the fellowship of the afflicted and [share their stories here](#) (3 min).²
- The tradition of a Jesse Tree comes from the prophetic announcement of the coming of Jesus in Isaiah 11:1: “a shoot will come out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” Jesse was the father of King David, the line from which Jesus was born. The Jesse Tree is decorated with one ornament each day leading up to Christmas that tells the story of God’s faithfulness throughout the four thousand years of history before Jesus’ birth. Each ornament represents a specific story that we hear from the Hebrew Bible that tells us about who God is and how God works in the world.



[Learn more about the Jesse Tree](#),³ then make your own by drawing it yourself or printing out a guide. Reflect and pray over each day learning more about the characteristics of God.

1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/father-james-martin-what-good-is-prayer>

2 https://youtu.be/6olowgPnBnY?si=oGn9LnHDXJro_aX6

3 <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/liturgical-year/advent/the-jesse-tree>

Compressed Hope

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, and go to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation. I will bring good to you. I will make your name great, so you will be honored.

—GENESIS 12:1-2 (NLV)

God took him outside and said, “Now look up into the heavens and add up the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then God said to him, “Your children and your children’s children will be as many as the stars.” Then Abram believed in the Lord, and that made him right with God.

—GENESIS 15:5-6 (NLV)

Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. *For everyone.* That was one of my biggest realizations after I got sick. I needed so much help—financially, emotionally, physically—and I would not have made it through without the compassion of strangers and friends. Pain can make narcissists out of the best of us. It demands all of our time and attention and very quickly becomes the loudest voice in the room. How easy it is to forget. Forget there is someone turning on and off the stars. Forget that the sun rises and sets without us having to remind it to. Forget there is someone who makes each snowflake unique. Forget that there is one who provides the rain and knows when a single sparrow falls from the sky (Matthew 10:29). These tiny miracles can be reminders to us that God holds the world together, not us. It reminds us that God created the whole world, and we are dependent on God. And

thank God for that because we might be having trouble with regular problems instead: making doctors and insurance paperwork make sense, navigating complicated relationships with family around the holidays, and just remembering to take out the trash on the right day of the week.

Hope is found in knowing that even though it feels like the world is coming undone in my time and maybe in my life situation, the truth is that the sun keeps rising every day and the stars still shine at night. The whole world shines hope upon us everyday. We are just like Abraham in Genesis 12—called out of our comfortable worlds into a hope for a future we cannot yet see. We must trust God to show us the beauty and promises of the bigger story as we try to count the stars (Genesis 15).

READ THIS BLESSING**for waking up to life again (p. 52)**

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

Blessed are we who say, Wake me too, God. Put me where beauty and love can reach me. I'm ready for something new.

REFLECT

1. Abraham was busy living his own life and seeking his own future. And God interrupts, telling him to pack his boxes. God promised Abraham that there was a future for his descendants, that they would multiply just as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 26:4), an ever-living reminder of God's steady promise. What do you imagine went through Abraham's mind as he heard this outlandish promise from God?
2. What holds you back from embracing the beauty that God has for you—beauty that can live alongside your very-loud, very-real pain? Is it because you feel stuck or hopeless? Is it the fear of the unknown or fear of being disappointed? What keeps you from believing that God is taking care of the world (including you!)?
3. How might God be calling you to step out of the comfort (or pain) of your own world and to look around, so God can show you something beautiful?

GOING DEEPER

- Writer Margaret Renkl talks about how beauty might be exactly what we need, especially when we are exhausted. Listen to her conversation with Kate called "[The Art of Noticing](https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-noticing)."¹
- Start a collection of something beautiful. There was a time my friend was working on an island in the Caribbean, and she started collecting sunsets. Everyday she would chase down a great location to see the sunset over the ocean and take a picture (which is a lot easier to do when you live on an island). But what can you find in your world that is beautiful that you can take a picture of, or make a written list, or collect somehow? Can you count the stars? Find flowers growing in the cracks of cement? Be still and watch the snowflakes fall? How can your practice of collecting beauty be a reminder to you of God's presence and promises?



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-noticing>

Take Courage

So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the LORD!

—PSALM 31:24 (NLT)

As we prepare for Christmas morning, we might have the manger scene in our mind's eye. A star lights the way. Clay shepherds and wise men will arrive unharmed. Mary and Joseph will find a cozy place to stay. A baby will be born (skipping all the gory details). This lovely scene has become a beautiful nativity, but those who lived through the story know the real fear that was carried in every step and every decision. Mary was afraid of being stoned to death for being pregnant outside of marriage. Joseph turned over in his mind the fear of judgment and exile within a small community for his engagement to an already-pregnant Mary. The wise men knew the courage it would take to face a vindictive king and possible death from their long journey. The shepherds must have been worried about leaving their sheep unattended in the fields, losing their livelihood and perhaps not being able to feed their families. Mary certainly understood the anxiety of giving birth, with each growing contraction. Every step was full of fear, and yet there

was one small sliver of hope that this baby being born could possibly change the world. It was that hope that gave them the courage to keep moving forward.

Hope requires a whole lot of courage. If we were certain we could control the outcome, we wouldn't need to hope at all. Hope is not made out of certainty; it is made out of necessity. This is so often where the followers of Jesus get confused. You can be certain there is a God. You can be certain of God's presence. But you can't be certain about *everything*. Hope is what gives you a way to go on—even if you are not going to get relief from ordinary and extraordinary pain, even when your loved one has died, even if your partner does not come back, even if you don't get to see the culmination of your own dreams. People who are hopeful know all about fear. Hope is seeing reality and having the courage to keep going, to keep moving, to keep loving, and to keep hoping.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for courage when you don't feel very brave (p. 104)

*Perhaps fear is not something to be vanquished,
But rather that strange friend who tell us
who we love, and what we can't live without.*

REFLECT

1. What are some of your biggest fears right now? How do those fears teach you something about what you love and cherish?
2. When we are most afraid, hope gives us the courage to keep moving. Where do you need a little courage today? How can you ask someone to walk this path with you by encouraging and having hope for you and with you, when you simply can't do it yourself?

GOING DEEPER

- How can you share hope today with someone you know or perhaps a stranger on the street? How can you walk with them on their journey, listening to their fears and showing them love? Can you write a note or text message to someone you know not giving false optimism but infusing them with courage?
- In a conversation between Kate and theologian Stanley Hauerwas ("[More Life, Fewer Explanations](#)"), Stanley says, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but it is the formation of rightly fearing what should be feared. If the courageous person didn't know fear they'd just be foolhardy. They wouldn't be courageous. So the courageous have fears that the coward will never know." [Watch this clip](#) (3.5 min)² to hear Stanley's understanding about the difference between happiness and hope and the courage it takes to hope.
- Take a minute to think about all the things that Mary and Joseph had to face as the parents of Jesus. Listen to "[Refugee King](#)"³ by Liz Vice also on our [Advent Spotify Playlist](#).



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/more-life-fewer-explanations-2>
 2 <https://youtu.be/hiHKnmnzJJI?si=IYzkvI2607U7ZrQK>
 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20g05Ijm0D8> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Bad, Bad Math

When I determined to load up on wisdom and examine everything taking place on earth, I realized that if you keep your eyes open day and night without even blinking, you'll still never figure out the meaning of what God is doing on this earth. Search as hard as you like, you're not going to make sense of it. No matter how smart you are, you won't get to the bottom of it.

—ECCLESIASTES 8:16-17 (MSG, A PARAPHRASE)

Math was never my best subject. Combining numbers (and letters!) and telling me to find an answer never quite clicked. But maybe I've never been keen on *formulas*.

We spend so much of our lives trying to balance out some kind of equation for life. Like if we do all the “right” things, then life will finally add up. But then real life happens. We did all the things we were supposed to do and the addiction still has a grip, the doctor still has no answers, a relationship is still not what it should be. Even if you have tried everything—prayer, positive vibes, hard work—nothing seems to change. It just simply doesn't add up. There is no magic formula to get

what you deserve, and there is no equation that can predict what will happen next.

But God is not a mathematician either. Just look at grace—the forgiveness and compassion of grace has no equation that is fair or even. So too, God's love is incalculable. God isn't counting or keeping records of how good you are or what you have earned or what you deserve. Hope is found in God's infinite love and unquestionable grace. God sent God's only son to show us that there is no way to measure, or count, or add up the ways that God loves us. It is a formula we can never wrap our minds around. And thank God for that bad, bad math.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for this beautiful limited day (p. 174)

*Blessed are we who see the impossibility of solving today.
It can't be done.*

REFLECT

1. What math problems are you trying to work out to make your life add up? Are you working hard to earn love? Are you wrestling to find the right formula to make you healthy or wealthy or whole? Are you trying to cram in more, more, more into a morning or a day or a life?
2. Think of a time when your attempts to solve a problem didn't work. Did you double down? Give up? Try a different way? What did you realize about yourself or God in that moment?
3. How can you accept the grace and love that God brings to the world, the kind that doesn't make sense and doesn't add-up? How can God's bad math bring you a glimmer of hope today?

GOING DEEPER

- We all need reminders that we can rest in the assurance of God's love. Sometimes we just need to hear it again. It is often good to hear things like: "There is nothing you can ever do to make God love you less" (Rob Bell), and "God already loves you completely." Listen to this song: "[Take it Easy](#)"¹ by The Porter's Gate (3:48 min), also on the [Advent Playlist](#).
- Listen to Kate reflect on what she has learned about hope in [this interview](#) with writer David Brooks in the face of her own fragility and faith. Kate wrestles with hope and courage, with certainty, with trying to make it all add-up (3 min)².
- Franciscan friar and ecumenical teacher Father Richard Rohr bears witness to the deep wisdom of Christian mysticism and tradition of action and contemplation. Father Rohr takes time to talk about God's "failures" in mathematics, and how we measure God's love and grace in all phases of life. Listen to "[Learning to Hold On, Learning to Let Go](#)" (39 min)³.



1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxPhR_6p6w4 | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

2 <https://youtu.be/0vYIYPIX4h0?si=qI3bc7WCgAseiR5p>

3 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/richard-rohr-learning-to-hold-on-learning-to-let-go>

The Best Medicine

Elimelech (Naomi's husband) died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband. One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home (Bethlehem)... After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!" She kissed them and they cried openly... Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

—RUTH 1:3-14 MSG, A PARAPHRASE

I always say that I don't have hobbies. *I have friends.* Who needs to learn to knit (I have terrible grip strength) when you can do something ridiculous with someone who loves you? Hope comes in many shapes and sizes, but hope, for me, often comes in the shape of my people. People who embody the very promises and presence of God. In the book of Ruth, we meet a woman whose life has come undone—she has lost her husband, her sons, her home, her security, and her future. Naomi has experienced profound grief—a change she marks by renaming herself *Mara*, meaning “bitter,” and declaring that her life and arms are empty (Ruth 1:19-21). In her grief, Naomi (Mara) tries to push everyone away. But her daughter-in-law Ruth doesn't leave her to believe that great lie that loss loves to whisper to us, “You are all alone.” Ruth stays. Ruth embraces her despite her despair.

Name it what you will—your besties, your book club, your co-workers, your siblings, your mom—these are the people who cling to you even as you declare, like Naomi, that your life is empty (Ruth 1:20-21). In God's faithfulness to us, we learn to be faithful to others even in the worst of times. Faithful friendships are the people who show up with a casserole (and know when you couldn't possibly eat another bite of lasagna) and a hug and maybe a bottle of wine or ice cream on your most difficult days. These are the people that know that they may not be able to fix what is happening or what has happened to you, but they can and will bear witness. These friends will believe (even when you can't) that the sun will rise again. And in that kind of hold-your-hand-through-the-worst-of-it love, may we find hope.

READ THIS BLESSING

for friends who hold us up (p. 60)

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

God, when I am no longer quite so tall and strong, give me those who hold me up and remind me of who I am and that I'm loved.

REFLECT

1. If you were to rename yourself based on this season of your life, what name would you choose? Why?
2. How have people shown up for you when you are struggling?
3. How did that comfort bring you a glimpse of hope? How can you be that hope for others?

GOING DEEPER

- The Hebrew word used to describe the love, embrace, and commitment of Ruth and Naomi is *hesed*, which can be translated as mercy, compassion, love, grace, and faithfulness. But none of these completely capture the emotion or feeling of this word. *Hesed* describes a sense of love and loyalty, of taking action on behalf of someone who is in need. In this story, Naomi rejoices in the “hesed” of the Lord because of Ruth’s loyalty, commitment, and faithful action. Ruth and Naomi’s friendship and relationship crossed ethnic and national boundaries (Ruth was an Isrealite, and Naomi was a Moabite). Yet, their faithful relationship is an example of God’s covenant, God’s “*hesed*,” to all the people (no matter where you come from). God works through Ruth and Naomi’s relationship and in doing so it changes the world. And, if you skip ahead to Matthew 1:5, Ruth is listed in the genealogy of Christ (spoiler alert!).
- Paul Zach sings about how “[Our Salvation is Bound up Together](#)” in this beautiful song, also on our Advent Playlist.¹ Listen while reflecting on the friendship of Ruth and Naomi (3 min).
- Share more than joy and good cheer this Christmas season. How can your actions, presence, or gifts be an act of hope to someone who needs it? Could you sing a silly Christmas carol, provide a Christmas meal, write a letter to someone who lives in isolation? Think of how you will act in hope this week.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiW4M9p1h0k> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

WEEK 2

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10
- SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17

Bless this *Peace-Filled* Advent



“There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God’s commandment.”

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

* <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Peace Amid Chaos

I will hear what the LORD God speaks; he speaks of peace...Merciful love and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have kissed. Faithfulness shall spring from the earth, and justice look down from heaven.

—PSALM 85:8, 10-11 (RGP)

“Shh, the baby’s sleeping!” says every new parent ever. But who can resist sneaking in on tip-toe to catch a glimpse of all that sleeping beauty. It’s no wonder God chose to win our hearts by coming to us as an itty-bitty infant. God speaks to us through the coming of Jesus, and that word God speaks, is *peace*. “Peace on earth and good toward all,” sang the angels at his birth (Luke 2:14, The Kate Bowler Version).

Yet, just as the peace of a snoozing baby is temporary, Christmas is precisely the time when peace can be in short supply too. There is so much expectation, so much longing and desire wrapped up into this celebration that it can be one of the most stress-filled times of the year. So much to do, and so little time. High pressure traditions that used to be fun or meaningful. Obligations that stretch us too thin. Disappointment that so-and-so didn’t show up *again*. But somehow we still find the time for the annual Christmas fight. *Ah, some traditions never die*. What we really need is a run-up to Advent—an Advent to our Advent—so we can get ready for getting ready.

Each Advent, there comes a point when I need to lock myself in the nearest bathroom. Take the deepest of breaths. Light a candle maybe. And find a way for peace to be possible even here and now in this chaotic, too-full moment. Carving out a place where wholeness and shalom can envelope me. Settle me. Where differences dissolve and justice is satisfied.

The Hebrew word for *justice* in Psalm 85 is often translated “righteousness,” being made right with others and before God in a natural, moral, or legal sense. Jesus is our righteousness and the place of new beginnings, a change of heart, of fresh forgiveness, and of new life that can spring up in the places that were once dried up and gone. *Does that sound nice right about now or what?*

In the meantime, we practice waiting by opening ourselves to the refreshment God can rain down on us, even now in our longing, in the midst of so much disarray and unsettledness. Maybe here, we can create more and more space for this by giving over our worries and anxieties to God, naming them to ourselves and per-

haps even to each other. We can breathe deeper when the heavy things we carry have been set down (or are at least shared with another). This is a form of peace—not only momentary relief from our struggles, but also

the recognition that there are things we humans don't know, can't know, and that it's like this for us all. *Life is hard, but we don't have to go it alone.*

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime some of the kids in your life.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Psalm 85** aloud.
- Light two of the purple candles and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 220) as a prayer:

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

—LUKE 2:14 (NIV)

Blessed are we, the fearful,
though we long to be people of peace.
We can't lie:
we are afraid.

Afraid there won't be enough—
enough resources,
enough time,
enough memories.

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 find.

Blessed are we who look to you and say,
God, truly, we are troubled and afraid.
Come govern our hearts and calm our fears.

Oh Prince of Peace,
still our restless selves,
calm our anxious hearts,
quiet our busy minds.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is taking up your attention, stealing your peace, or causing you anxiety this Advent season?
2. Kate describes hiding away in the bathroom and lighting a candle when she feels overwhelmed or in need of a break. What habits or practices do you turn to when you need a break?
3. In Galatians 6:2, Paul encourages the church in Galatia to “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (NASB). What are you carrying? Can you share it with others now? Even if it isn’t easily fixable, can you shoulder it together?



Embracing Our Humanity

And in the same area there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And then an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very afraid. But the angel said to them, “Listen! Do not fear. For I bring you good news of great joy, which will be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: You will find the Baby wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly there was with the angel a company of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good will toward men.”

—LUKE 2:8-14 (MEV)

This was no picture-perfect, Instagram-worthy baby announcement. This was real life. The shepherds were probably terrified when shiny beings appeared to them in the middle of the night and started speaking and singing and bossing them around. Jesus was born in a smelly barn, in poverty, with all of the natural, messy details that accompany a birth. Soon, this tiny baby and his family would become immigrants on the run (Matthew 2:13-15). This birth story was complicated, scary, smelly, and not easy. Yet, we often skip past those very human details to only hear the angels singing a song of “good news and great joy.”

As you probably know, one of my constant prayers is “God, let me see things clearly.” This is hard to do when we are taught to look on the bright side, find a silver lining, grin and bear it, or to count our blessings. After all, everyone is supposed to feel joy and gratitude, *especial-*

ly at Christmas. The problem is that we can never find peace if we try to swallow up “bad” emotions or ignore reality. They don’t stay bottled up forever—which could be why we explode over Christmas dinner or snap at the clerk in the check-out line at the grocery store or feel so unsettled as we try to go to sleep every night. This way of living is anything but peaceful for us, for our families, or for that poor grocery store clerk.

True peace comes when we see things clearly, see the whole story, not just the good parts. Jesus’ birth did not deny the human experience but embraced it. Jesus’ humanity was part of the gift of peace and goodwill that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds and for all of us. This Christmas, may we embrace our humanity and the humanity of others, finding a way for peace to reign alongside all the chaos.

READ THIS BLESSING

for feeling it all (p. 4)

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

Oh, you beautiful creature, here is your permission slip to feel it all. To feel the joy and delight and excitement. And the sorrow and fear and despair.

REFLECT

- Place a checkmark below if you have ever had a friend, family member, or church tell you one of the following:

<input type="checkbox"/> Look on the bright side	<input type="checkbox"/> Big girls don't cry	<input type="checkbox"/> Can't you just be happy?
<input type="checkbox"/> Find a silver lining	<input type="checkbox"/> Give it to God	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't say that and make it true
<input type="checkbox"/> Grin and bear it	<input type="checkbox"/> Count your blessings	<input type="checkbox"/> Start a gratitude journal
<input type="checkbox"/> Fake it til' you make it	<input type="checkbox"/> Choose joy	<input type="checkbox"/> Don't worry be happy
<input type="checkbox"/> Just trust God	<input type="checkbox"/> Be optimistic	<input type="checkbox"/> God always works for the good!
- Now, think about the things people said that felt more helpful, maybe more empathetic.
- What emotions have you been pushing aside or bottling up? Are there feelings that you are denying for the sake of Christmas? For the sake of the kids? For the sake of _____? How can your willingness to validate, accept, and feel those feelings in a safe way bring more peace to you, your family, and the world this Christmas?

GOING DEEPER

- Psychologist Dr. Susan David is concerned by the way toxic positivity often causes us to bottle up or brood upon our feelings. Susan helps us explore other options for dealing with the fragility of life—listen to her and Kate in this clip, "[Toxic Positivity](#)" (7 min).¹
- Gratitude is not a guaranteed "solution" to the problem of pain or struggle. Listen to Kate explain why she can feel both grateful and rage against forcing people to "brightside" their circumstances in [this video](#) (1 min).²
- Chris Tomlin and Audrey Assad sing "[Winter Snow](#)" (3:32 min).³ This beautiful song explores the many ways God could have come to earth, yet God chose to embrace humanity.



1 <https://youtu.be/-FBwV54X3Ko?si=wsiqwrmurcPOjGmV>

2 https://youtu.be/Gfpr2UyKu9A?si=VV_d8yw3LUD9hxnR

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDCtpIZH_DA

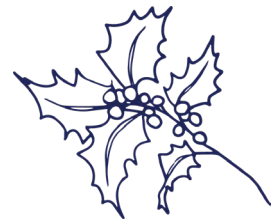
A (Not-So) Perfect Christmas

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—PHILIPPIANS 4:7 (NIV 1984)

Let's take a little quiz. How obsessed with the Christmas Season are you?

- I own more than one Christmas sweater (bonus point if they are ugly).
- I have Christmas-themed earrings.
- I have more than one Christmas tree (bonus points for every real tree).
- More than one room in my house is decorated.
- I start decorating before Thanksgiving (bonus point if it is before Halloween).
- Even my pets have stockings.
- I have a cookie exchange (bonus point if you host it).
- I make a gingerbread house every year (bonus point if it is a megachurch).
- I participate in the annual Christmas pageant.
- Christmas music is all that plays in my car or home in the month of December (bonus point if you start in October).
- I watch 3-5 Christmas movies throughout December.
- I watch 6-10 Christmas movies throughout December.
- I watch 11+ Christmas movies throughout December.
- I use the Hallmark Christmas Movie App.
- I am using more than one Advent devotional.
- I force my family or friends to wear matching pajamas.
- Elf on the Shelf visits my house.
- I attend every Christmas event at church and in my town.
- I go Christmas Caroling to people's houses or to the downtown square.
- I drive around for more than an hour to find Christmas Lights.



Now, tally your score: _____

If you scored between 0-5, you're a **Christmas Grinch!**

It sounds like you have a good balance of managing the over-the-top with the sweet spirit of Christmas.

If you scored between 6-10, you're a great **Christmas Cindy Lou Hoo!**

You bring such a sweet Christmas spirit to all you do.

If you scored between 11-20+, you are a **Christmas Elf!**

Part of Santa's reliable crew, you are bringing cheer and singing loud for all to hear!

I will admit it here and here only. I am a Christmas Elf myself. I think I come by it earnestly since my dad is an expert on Christmas. No really. *He wrote Santa's Biography.* I want the Christmas season to feel like magic. But, then life happens. Like the big feelings when the gingerbread megachurch collapses because Toban didn't make the icing sticky enough (but who's pointing fingers). Or I am in too much pain to go to the Christmas show I bought tickets for months ago. Or a flight gets canceled. Or the traditional family fight causes everyone to leave the room. The magic of the season doesn't

erase our regular problems. The chronic pain or doctor's appointments or alcoholism or mental health issue.

The chaos of Christmas can feel anything but peaceful or idyllic. And yet, this is the season we celebrate the coming of the Prince of Peace, a peace that is instituted not through armies or edicts but through a tiny infant. Truly that is peace that surpasses understanding. So this is the Christmas we actually have—sometimes messy, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes absurdly joyful. May we make room for the Prince of Peace in every imperfect moment.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for when you just can't find any peace (p. 38)

*God, in this dark valley,
let your light reach me.
Let your Spirit comfort me.
Help me understand how my body
and mind and heart
can be at rest even here.*

*Jesus said,
"I have told you these things,
so that in me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble.
But take heart!
I have overcome the world."*

—John 16:33 (NIV)

REFLECT

1. What are the ways in which you have been trying to force or create peace in your life? How have you been trying to meet the needs of others in order to keep the “peace” in your world?
2. In John 16:33, Jesus says, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace,” telling us to “take heart!” because he has overcome the world. How might Jesus’ words give you permission to find peace for yourself instead of forcing peace to happen in the world around you this season?

GOING DEEPER

- Take a moment to pray to God to teach you how to slow down this season by listening to “[Slow me Down](#)” by The Porter’s Gate (4:11 min), also on our [Advent Playlist](#).¹



- What would your ideal Christmas season feel like? Circle the words below that you wish were true (or add your own).

PEACEFUL	ENGAGING	SILLY	TENDER	LOVING	NURTURING	LIGHT-HEARTED
JOYFUL	GIVING	COZY	CHEERFUL	CONTENT	TENDER	MEMORABLE
INTIMATE	ENERGIZED	CARING	DREAMY	RENEWING	HOPEFUL	WHIMSICAL
WARM	EXPECTANT	CALM	INSPIRING	RESTFUL	FUN	FAITH-BUILDING

- Now, let’s get honest. Including the options above, how does your actual Christmas feel? Circle the words below that feel true (or add your own).

RESTLESS	FRAGILE	TIRING	SERIOUS	LONELY	OVERWHELMING
FRUSTRATING	SAD	NUMB	STRESSFUL	ANXIOUS	HEAVY-HEARTED
RESTLESS	HOPELESS	UNCERTAIN	RESENTFUL	RENEWING	DISAPPOINTING
JEALOUS	EXHAUSTING	LOUD	FEARFUL	MEH	UNCOMFORTABLE

- How can you prepare and make room for the Prince of Peace in your heart this Christmas season? What ideals are you ready to let go of in order to find more peace and more of what God has for you this Christmas?

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0W6tNWtJTk | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Bless it All

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.*

*He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.*

*He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,*

*The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.*

—LUKE 1:46-55

(THE CANTICLE OF MARY, MODERN VERSION IN *THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS*)



Suddenly, Mary found herself pregnant and unwed—a cultural no-no at the time. Her fiancé Joseph would have every reason to break it off as soon as he knew the truth, leaving her futureless and disgraced. We wouldn't have blamed Mary for being down and out about what was happening to her. But instead she erupts in a song of praise. How could Mary have *that* reaction under *those* circumstances? Her song defines humility because it embraces all she can't control, and lets everything rest on a goodness far beyond herself. Mary blesses it all and sees herself as somehow within that blessing too—despite the reality in front of her. Maybe there is something we can learn from Mary as we too open our hearts to God and to God's promises. When we bless it all—all we know and can't know.

This models the same wisdom of the ancients who, in the decades after Jesus lived on earth, saw that when we bring it all to God there is a mysterious “peace that sur-

passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams says that the good life “is honest about where it lives.” From that place of honesty, all our instinctual and reactive selves can be brought to God whose loving gaze is the beginning of the healing we seek. Williams says that it is a place of both prospect and refuge, “where my rhythm is echoed, my speech is understood. My face is seen...To be recognized and recognizable, lifts from me the burden of making myself up.”

So with the apostle Peter we can invite our worried and anxious selves into the presence of God. This is the intimate space where peace-making within oneself begins.

“So, humble yourselves under God's strong hand, and in his own good time he will lift you up. You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern.” —1 Peter 5:6-7 (Phillips)

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for a peaceful day or night (p. 20)

*Oh peace, you are the mountain we glimpse from afar,
the height and depth of our needs.
We chart our way to you by starlight,
through paths overgrown with wrongs we ourselves have seeded,
then left to grow unchecked.*

REFLECT

1. Let your worries and fears and disappointments come to the surface. Take them by the hand and lead them into the light of day for a conversation with God. What can you tell God about how these things are affecting you?
2. What is God saying to you about them?

GOING DEEPER

- Listen to Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) put to music by William Kembrough in “[Mary’s Song \(Our King of Peace\)](#)” (3:30 min), also on our [Advent Playlist](#).¹
- As many in this community have expressed, they live in “the landscape of the unknown” and that is where you might be living right now. Look around. What is it that *can* be known? What feels like solid ground? Take pen and paper and, without thinking too much, jot down those things that ground you.
- Sometimes—maybe most times?—it’s just true that “we live between a problem and a solution, between sick and healed, between a prayer and a miracle.” This quote is from Kate’s conversation with writer Taylor Harris whose child has an undiagnosed condition. Listen to “[Peace for Our Anxious Selves](#)” (35 minutes)² for the nuggets of wisdom that surfaced about living in this liminal space, in lives that are a continual Advent as we wait together.
- What does the most ancient Christian wisdom tell us about what a good life is, and what can ground us? [Listen to this talk by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams](#) given in 2018 to the Camden Hospital Psychotherapy Unit (38 min).³



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VpYAi9j6hY> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>
 2 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/taylor-harris-peace-for-our-anxious-selves>
 3 <https://youtu.be/Kkg9aCxOWfs>



The Peace of Truth

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.

—EPHESIANS 4:25 (MSG, A PARAPHRASE)

Don't you love it when you open a gift on Christmas morning and think, *oh you really, really shouldn't have*, but out of politeness and gratitude you say, "I love it!" Maybe we have learned to perfect the art of the half-truth. But perhaps our dishonesty to keep everyone comfortable has come at a steep cost. The cost of being known and of knowing one another. How many times have you answered "How are you?" with, "Great!" or "Fine!" or "Busy!" while, in fact, you know you're barely holding it all together? Or actually could use a friend? Or you don't want to come across as needy?

Maybe today, we can take a note out of Jesus' book, instead. Jesus came to earth as a human, so that he could

echo back our story. So that he could hear our prayers and say, "Same. I get it." Jesus has loved and lost (John 11:1-44). Jesus has cried and been frustrated (Luke 19:41-44). Jesus felt alone and forgotten (Matthew 27:46). Jesus wanted things to change and knew that they couldn't (Luke 22:42, "Lord, take this cup"). Jesus understands the fragility of being human and didn't try to hide it. He was honest with his friends about how he felt and what he was going through. Jesus' prayers were honest and true.

Maybe peace starts with the courage to share the truth with someone and to hear them echoing back to you a clear and resounding "same," or an "oh yeah, me too!" A peace in knowing we are never, ever alone.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for truth-telling—however bitter or sweet (p. 28)

Blessed are you, the truth-teller. And what a miracle it is when your candor finds a chorus that echoes back: "Same."

The friend who will hear it. The parent who will stomach it.

The partner who doesn't roll their eyes.

They hear you, and it feels like a revelation.

Every. Time.

REFLECT

1. What is your truth that you need to speak to someone today?
2. How can sharing your truth help release you from the isolation and loneliness that half-truths create?
3. What is like to have someone in your life who understands and has felt your truth in their own ways? What does it feel like to know that Jesus has experienced your reality as well?

GOING DEEPER

- Let's Talk! Realizing that we have not been honest with either ourselves or with our friends is a hard reality to face. Often, we have very good reasons that we created a half-truth, usually to protect ourselves, to protect our friends, or to protect our relationships. But half-truths don't help build full-relationships. Honesty builds relationships. So think of one or two safe people you have in your world that can handle the truth about your life and how you feel. Write down the names of those two people and set a time to talk to them.
- "[Your Peace will Make Us One](#)" by Audrey Assad (3:40 min) is set to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" emphasizing how God might be marching us to truth.¹
- Maybe you are the person who is very honest about how you feel and maybe a bit of an over-sharer (like me!). Perhaps, there is someone you have crossed paths with lately that needs to hear your story, your truth, so that they know they are not alone. If you have the courage to share your story, then maybe they can say, "me too!" And that would be enough to bring more peace to their world. Can you think and pray about someone who needs to hear your story and set a time to share it with them? Or sometimes I pray, "Lord, if you need me to talk to this person, present a time and space."
- Writer Kelly Corrigan was sharing her "crappies" from the past year with Kate, and shared this bit of wisdom: when we share our real stories, it allows our friends to have "more of you in our hearts." Listen to "[Cheers to the Crappies](#)" (4 min).²



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTQWSfzY2mw> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

2 https://youtu.be/4_8qPNgDJ8E?si=9Zpyy0_fSiEjXnO

Something Else is Also Happening

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

—JOHN 14:27 (NIV)

There's a wonderful trick I do when I am very afraid, and it's a game called "Something Else Is Also Happening." It goes like this.

I'll be having a truly terrible moment, like I'm getting my blood drawn in a dark basement of the hospital, and then I decide that's not the only thing going on. So I tell the bloodwork nurse that it's probably not a coincidence that he's brought me somewhere discreet to feast on my rich, delicious, B+ blood. And there's always like a horrible moment where he stares at me and then there's a terrible silence. But then he begins to lightly stroke the inside of my elbow crease, as if just considering it for the first time. And then he says something like, "I always ask for the night shift." And then I'm like, there it is! I'm not just someone who has lots of health problems. I am living an exciting plotline with a nurse who's pretending to be a vampire.

"Something Else Is Also Happening" is a great addition to sadness or anger or fear or any number of emotions

that rise up in the face of suffering. A sort of absurd perspective-pull into something else taking place alongside my pain or fear or anger. Like the time I got very interested in my intake nurse's dating history. Not to erase the pain or fear but to give myself permission to care about something else for a minute, too.

So then, what are we to make of Jesus' words when he says to his disciples, "Don't be afraid." *Easy for him to say. God is God after all.* But maybe that's actually the point. Maybe Jesus knows that *something-else-that-is-also-happening* too. That's the meaning-making Jesus offers: His presence. At Christmas as God-in-human-flesh, God with us. As the Easter-risen-Savior who says, "Don't be afraid. It's me!" And then as the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth to be with us even unto the end of the age. A story far bigger than our fear or anxiety or anger. A story we can find ourselves inside.

READ THIS BLESSING

for the gift of doubt (p. 100)

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

*Blessed are we remembering that you hold all things together.
You are the invisible scaffolding that supports us,
the canopy of love that covers us in the present,
the stable pillars, sunk deep into our past,
and the sparrow that flies confidently toward the future
bearing for us the peace we could never have attained for ourselves.*

REFLECT

1. When talking about peace, Jesus said, “I do not give to you as the world gives” (John 14:27). What do you think he meant? What is the peace of the world? What is the peace of Christ?
2. We sometimes try to console ourselves or others by trying to make sense of our troubles. Do explanations work for you? Always, sometimes, never? If not, what works better?
3. Imagine Jesus was sitting with you right now. What would you say to him? What troubling doubts or awkward questions might arise? What comforts or consolations?

GOING DEEPER

- Like Kate’s game of “Something Else is Happening,” how might the art of the absurd be a comfort for you? Listen to Kate’s conversation with the absurdly funny writer, Jenny Lawson: “[The Art of the Absurd](#)” (40 min).¹
- Song suggestion: “[The Road, The Rocks, and The Weed](#)” by John Mark McMillan (3:36), also on our Advent Playlist.² This song reflects on a God who comes down and suffers with us.



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/jenny-lawson-the-art-of-the-absurd>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcAazEpsUJY> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

GOING DEEPER (CONT.)

- In Kate's conversation with historian Michael Ignatieff, he spoke about how comfort and consolation are different. Human comfort can come with a hug or a look of concern from someone we trust, but consolation goes deeper. It gives us a reason to go on. Notice, Michael didn't say that consolation gives us a reason for why the bad thing happened. When speaking about his grief after the death of his younger brother, he says:



"This is not Hallmark greeting card time. When you've been hit by something that hard, you have a right to expect that your friends will choose their words very carefully because we've all got a very good detector for what's false. And there are very few forms of consolation we actually trust."

Listen to this [conversation with Michael Ignatieff](#) on how to genuinely keep pace with someone who is suffering (5 min).¹

- In John 14:16-17, Jesus tells his friends that the Holy Spirit will come and be with them forever. Jesus calls this spirit the Comforter, another Advocate (another one who is just like himself), and the Spirit of truth. Truth is a reality that lies outside ourselves, one we don't have to make up. What do you imagine the relationship is between truth and peace? How does reality create a sense of peace in your own experience?

¹ Clip: https://youtu.be/v5ekyAaHR7g?si=SNCGZE7hrR_3CMfm
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/where-we-turn-for-meaning/>

Peace Be With You

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering, and he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

—LUKE 24:36-43 (NRSV)

The story of Jesus begins and ends in peace. The angels proclaim peace to Mary, mother of Jesus (Luke 1:28), and to the Shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). And upon his resurrection, Jesus himself proclaims peace to his disciples after he endured great pain and death (Luke 24:36). The peace of Christ is very different from any worldly peace. It is not something we can create or obtain by mastering our own lives. The peace of Christ comes from an other-worldly love and grace—a love that sends God’s son to earth as a vulnerable baby to show the world what love feels like.

In many Christian traditions, there is a part of the service that includes a time for the congregation to pass the peace. We leave the comfort of our regular pew (don’t

you dare sit in my seat) to turn to our neighbors and speak the words, “peace be with you,” and receive the words, “and also with you.” This tradition is more than a simple exchange or greeting. It is a covenant, a promise, shared between believers that they are living towards the ever-expanding peace of Christ. The act of passing the peace is one of extending unfathomable grace and unconditional love to our neighbors, to the stranger, to the one standing next to us. And often that person is not one we would necessarily choose (they might not prefer us either). No matter how broken or smelly or don’t-have-it-all-together we might be, we are invited to join in the chorus of those who come in peace, just as Christ taught us. Together.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for when you want more (p. 186)

*To be fully known, and fully loved, in all our humanity.
That is a God-sized project.*

*Blessed are we, thankful that we can live our human-sized lives
in the glad company of the vulnerable and the broken, the imperfect
made whole in the love of God, through Jesus Christ.*

REFLECT

1. What are some ways you can offer the gift of peace to yourself, showing yourself love and grace?
2. How can you offer others the promise and hope of peace by “passing the peace” this Advent season?

GOING DEEPER

- Pass the peace through prayer. Too often peace is something we have half-heartedly prayed for because we are so limited in our ability to dream of peace in a world of pain and chaos. Peace isn't dependent on outside circumstances and peace isn't dependent on whether you like or enjoy someone's presence. Peace is much deeper than like or dislike. Peace is much broader than getting along. Peace is a promise. So find a piece of paper, post-it note, or pull-up a blank google doc. Write “PEACE” in the middle of the paper. Begin to pray and talk about the kind of peace that Christ can bring to our lives. You can start writing scripture around the word. You can draw objects that bring peace to your life or you can simply write down names of people whom you find have a peaceful spirit. Pray for a deeper understanding of peace as you draw, think, and reflect.

WEEK 3

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17
- SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22

Bless this *Joy-Filled* Advent



“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

—FATHER PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

* <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Uninvited Joy

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

—LUKE 1:41-45 (NRSV)

I've borrowed categories from my friend Luke Bretherton—who happens to also be a theologian (it's very helpful to know a few of those). Like what he calls "tragic time"—that experience of time when things come undone and whatever has happened is world-altering. Tragic time feels almost slippery. Like you cannot believe the world is still spinning because yours has stopped. And yet, somehow, experiences of joy can still catch you off guard.

Joy is sneaky in that way. It doesn't discriminate between tragic time and ordinary time. It's not a joy we can "choose" because that would often mean ignoring the reality of our heartbreak or circumstances. It just happens. Somehow. Some way. Showing up uninvited even in the most unlikely of situations.

The Gospel of Luke introduces us to Elizabeth who became pregnant after many, many years of infertility, well into her old age. Her husband, Zechariah, even reacted in utter disbelief when the angel foretold the birth of the child they had long-ago given up

hope for. When Elizabeth was six months along, she was visited by her beloved cousin, Mary—who too had just learned of her own miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth's unborn baby leapt with joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, rejoiced at the great gift Mary carried. Elizabeth was likely surprised by the visit of her cousin (it is not like she could text when she was on her way) and even more surprised by her showing up unmarried and pregnant. But those circumstances were not the cause of the joy that Elizabeth and her soon-to-be baby boy felt at her arrival. Their reaction was caused by the presence of God, of that new life that was growing inside of Mary—despite the complicated situation that surrounded her pregnancy. Both women were experiencing the seemingly-impossible. They could have both responded in disbelief, in unhope, but instead were filled with the surprising presence of joy.

This story reminds us that joy is not the absence of fear, or disbelief, or uncertainty, or sorrow. In fact, joy exists despite all the reasons why it shouldn't.

In the week ahead, we will devote ourselves to learning more about how to recognize the gift of joy found in the presence of God. Regardless of what is happening in our lives, joy can and does break in. Joy is

the sign and reminder that God is still working, still loving, still fulfilling God's promises. So let's put ourselves in the path of joy this week, shall we?

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your grandkids.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary in **Luke chapter 1** aloud. Pay attention to how many times **JOY** is mentioned.
- Light the three purple candles (but sometimes the joy candle is pink!) and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 218) as a prayer:

Blessed are we who wait with bated breath,
who wait for something new to be born
—for new hope or new joy or new life.

Blessed are we
whose patience grows thinner by the day.
We who are tired of the world as it is
—in all of its heartache and loss and hopelessness.
We who want more.
More hope. More joy. More life.

Blessed are we who sit here,
waiting
at the still point between desire and expectation.
We who are making room for more of you,
oh God, this Christmas.

Surprise us with joy in the midst of the mundane,
abundance in the midst of so much scarcity,
presence in the midst of the Christmas chaos.

*“May the God of hope fill you
with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

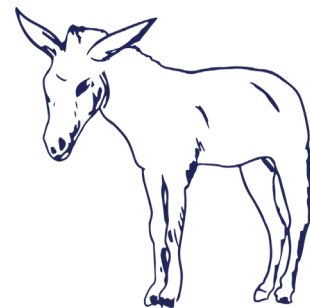
—Romans 15:13 (NIV)

We have quieted our souls to listen,
to wait for you, oh God,
for your Word-Made-Flesh is life to us.

Amen.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. Talk about a time when you have felt filled with joy. What were you doing? What did it feel like? Is there any common thread between everyone's experiences of joy?
2. Have you ever been surprised by the presence of God or a moment of joy or abundance during a particular season of tragic time?
3. How can you be a source of joy to others this week? Could you go caroling to your neighbors? Or could you call some other family members (like the ones we are usually too busy to call)? Could you visit someone in the hospital? Or send a card of love and joy in the mail?



Mysterious Joy

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

—JOHN 3:6-8 (NRSV)

Because I have found that joy is not something I can force or "choose," I try to imagine ways *to run into* this great gift. Circumstances or plans or people who might make joy possible. Like throwing ridiculous birthday parties. When Zach, the tiny human in my home, turned 9 last year, I threw a ridiculous farm-animal themed party. There were goats, bunnies, and adult farmer drinks. The kids ran around like they were one with the animals, and even my dad (who hates anything outdoors) was having a good time. As I looked around, I caught eyes with Zach. Delirious with joy, he ran up to me and asked, "Is this the day that I'm born again?" And, of course, I had to excuse myself into the farm bathroom and have a solid cry because the joy in my heart was overflowing.

Being born again is the promise that Christ brings to us. Joy is jumbled up in our response to that new life and the presence of its Giver. It might not be as easy as looking in the mirror and telling yourself: "I will be joyful today." But you can make plans to cross paths with joy. You can plan a simple gathering with the people you love. You can go outside and play in the snow (if you have snow), or go spotting for the best Christmas lights. Maybe you need to plan a ridiculous birthday party, and if it isn't your birthday, you can throw one for Jesus. Make a plan to cross paths with something big or small that helps you run into joy, and there you may find new life sprouting within you. When you find that joy, be reminded of the promise of Christ that allows us to be born again.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for this lovely day (p. 46)

*Blessed are we who desire to feel our hearts soar
with the glory set in the heavens,
the moon and the stars,
with awe at the people right in front of us,
with the beauty of the lily in its elegant purity,
and the matter and power of the tiniest seed,
bursting to life as it was always destined to do.*

REFLECT

1. Can you remember a time when you were delirious with joy? Or when you witnessed someone full of joy?
2. How did that joy cause you to see or feel new life? To be born again?
3. What plan can you make today to cross paths with joy? What prayer can you pray, asking for new life and joy for this season?

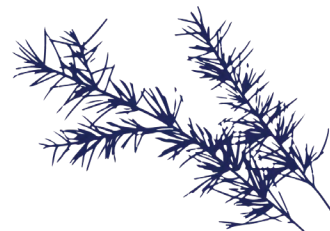
GOING DEEPER

- Do you need to plan a gathering to cross paths with joy? It doesn't have to be fancy or elaborate, but it does need to be intentional. Like the time Kate was getting treatments hundreds of miles away from family and friends, and she needed to find some joy. So, she gathered a bunch of acquaintances together to sing Christmas carols. You can learn more about "[The Art of Gathering](#)" (6 min) in Kate's conversation with Priya Parker.¹
- Don't have a lot of time to listen to the podcast? Here is a [free guide](#) from expert gatherer Priya Parker to unlock new and creative ways to transform your next event.²



1 Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3gMTCuZt8c>
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-gathering>

2 <https://www.priyaparker.com/the-new-rules-of-gathering>



Small Delights

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

—PSALM 36:7-9 (NIV)

Sometimes our obsessed-with-positivity culture forces us to be grateful or optimistic or to find a brightside. But I think we need a wider language to capture the multitudes in a single day. A moment of *meh*. Another of thankfulness. Yet another of irritation. Sometimes our grief or sadness or exhaustion catches us by surprise. And the next moment might have us in a fit of laughter. Maybe we should embrace “whatever kind of day we are having” (we even made posters for our office!).

My friend, journalist Catherine Price, spent several years studying “fun.” What does fun feel like? Can we manufacture the experience of fun? Is fun uniform to every person? What if we don’t have time for fun!? Her research uncovered that true fun, which she defines as a combination of playfulness, connection, and flow, is essential for a joy-filled life. But how do we do it when our lives are too full of the things that rob us of experiences of joy?

One practice Catherine started using she borrowed from writer Ross Gay. When she is in a moment of delight, she takes note of it. She sticks her pointer finger in the air and says, “Delight!” This small practice doesn’t pretend

a whole day is delightful (they often aren’t), but takes a minute to recognize the moments when delight interrupts the monotony of a day. A gorgeous sunset on your way home from work. Delight! The joke the kid in your life made that made them crack up. Delight! A catch-up with an old friend where you felt known. Delight! A delicious meal. Delight! Clean sheets. Double delight!

Catherine explains that finding delights might feel easier than keeping a gratitude journal, where you can sometimes feel forced to be thankful for e.v.e.r.y.t.h.i.n.g. (Because, if we’re honest, sometimes our kids or spouses or roommates or parents are a source of gratitude and other times they are menaces.) Delights are small and simple pleasures you can identify throughout your ever-changing day. A chance to be honest about the small, pin-sized moments of joy in an otherwise garbage day.



READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for learning to delight again (p. 176)

*Blessed are you who discover that even in the smallness,
your attention might be compressed even more.
You who pull out a magnifying glass
to discover, to notice, to taste, to smell
the small joys and simple pleasures that make a life worth living.*

REFLECT

1. What kind of day are you having today? Circle the word that fits.

JOY-FILLED	LOVELY	MAGICAL	PAINFUL
GARBAGE	DIFFICULT	UNREMARKABLE	LIMITED
MEH	OVERWHELMING	MEANINGFUL	MOURNFUL

3. What are the savory things of life that remind you of the goodness of God? This goodness does not have to deny or ignore the day you are having. There is enough space to hold both at the same time.
4. How can you start to see small delights in the world and share them with others?

GOING DEEPER

- Learn more about delights in Kate’s conversation with Catherine Price, “[Serious About Fun](#).”¹ Or add Catherine’s book *The Power of Fun* to your to-read list.
- Start a delight text message thread with a friend or group. It is really simple. When you see something that brings you delight, you can text the group or send a picture. You can laugh or cry together at all of the amazing things you notice.
- Need a reminder that every moment is the day we’re actually having? Download a free printable to hang up in your home or use as a phone lockscreen.²



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/serious-about-fun>

2 <https://katebowler.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/have-whatever-day-print-larger.pdf>

A Cake for Christmas

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

—ISAIAH 9:6 (ESV)

The beautiful and terrible always live side-by-side. It's a strange reality.

Poet Maggie Smith described this truth on the first Christmas after her divorce. Her two kids spent the night at their dad's house, and Maggie woke up with the heaviness and dread of an empty home on what should be a special day. Then, the doorbell rang. A neighbor stood on her doormat with cake in hand. She remembered that Maggie would be alone on Christmas morning and wanted to remind her she wasn't forgotten.

Our lives can come apart in a million tiny ways. Try as we might, we can't often engineer our own happi-

ness. There are certain realities we have to live with—like parents who have to share kids on Christmas. But, somehow, joy can meet us right in the depths of our can't-make-it-work humanity.

Which is, of course, the very story of Jesus. Jesus was born as all infants are, shivering and protesting loudly. Yet on those tiny shoulders rests the basis of all that is most solid, most true, most trustworthy: love. A love that is for us—for me, for you—and for the whole world. This is how joy comes to us, full of surprises in the middle of our beautiful, terrible realities. Just like Maggie's neighbor was God's love in human form, cake and all.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for stretching your heart (p. 18)

God, my life has too many things.

Awful. Lovely. Full. Shockingly incomplete.

Will you help me learn to live with a greater capacity for this?

Living in the tension between a life that has worked out . . .

and one that has gone to hell in every handbasket.

Let today be a divine exercise of yes . . . and.

REFLECT

1. This blessing speaks of how pain reminds us that we're not invincible. Have you experienced this reminder? Was it gradual? Sudden?
2. Pain is a vast canvas against which big loves and small delights shine brightly. What beauty can you see that comes forward to greet you amidst the terrible?
3. Do you have post-it notes you can stick up around your house? A white board to write on? Spread these small delights around on the path of your everyday life like rose petals, to slow you down and turn your face toward what is lovely and good.

GOING DEEPER

- The new terrible in poet Maggie Smith's life arrived in the form of a divorce—one she never imagined possible. Join Kate's conversation with Maggie called, "[This Place Could be Beautiful, Right?](#)" (3 min clip), to hear about how joy can ring the doorbell and be invited into the terrible.¹
- In Kate's conversation with Miroslav Volf, they talk about how joy in the midst of suffering is possible because it has something to do with being loved. Theologian Miroslav Volf said, "Even when I can't stand myself, I can be pulled out of myself by some other force. God's love is there, irrespective of how skillful we are to engineer our emotions, and our circumstances." This is the ultimate anti-bootstrapping gospel. Listen to "[Life Worth Living](#)" (41 min).²
- Jesus came to be with us, to be human like us. He knows exactly how it feels from the inside. Go to a special place of great beauty or comfort, or even just in your mind's eye, perhaps a place from your childhood. Wait for Jesus to meet you there, and tell him what is most true for you today, everything about it, the beautiful and the terrible.



1 Clip: https://youtu.be/xpMi1SqpdTE?si=RrZdP_3nvrLZJpR9
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/this-place-could-be-beautiful-right>

2 https://katebowler.com/podcasts/miroslav_volf

Joy in Caring

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

—JOHN 10:10 (NIV)

Some of my very favorite kinds of people have existentially and emotionally expensive professions. These healthcare workers and first responders, caregivers and therapists, teachers and social workers, chaplains, priests, and funeral directors have chosen jobs that take them to the heart of human need. They understand the precarity of life. They see it every day. Like my friend Gary Haugen who rescues kids from human slavery around the world. Gary and his colleagues at International Justice Mission bear witness to so much fragility and pain. But they, like so many others in caring professions, feel called.

As Thomas Merton says, “Our individual vocation is our opportunity to find that one place in which we can most

perfectly receive the benefits of divine mercy, and know God’s love for us, and reply to His love with our whole being.” It is perhaps surprising that the place where we are most effective as givers is the exact place where we better understand God’s mercy and love for us. In this divine alchemy, we give and we get.

But, hey, if you’re feeling a little rundown or burnt out, bless you. Perhaps borrow Gary’s trick for sustaining this kind of work. “Joy,” he says, “is the oxygen for doing hard things.” Where can you top up on joy today?

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for caregivers (p. 96)

Blessed are we who say, I really can’t keep going like this, at this pace, under this weight, and the momentum is so strong.

God, come and be the wisdom to find that the community is broad enough, kind enough, effective enough to meet the needs that are here —both mine and theirs.

REFLECT

1. Where in your life do you see how precarious, how fragile, and how precious life is?
2. Do you sense joy in any particular activity or role that brings meaning to your life, whether or not it is a paying job?
3. What is your level of fatigue in the work that you do? Where could there be an adjustment so that it is more life-giving for you and for others? Or do you need a hard reset?

GOING DEEPER

- There are days that we need to be reminded that God is with us. There are days we need encouragement to keep working and doing the work God has called us to do. There are days we need to hear God calling us by name. Listen to this song (on repeat if needed) until you soak in these gentle reminders: “[Your Labor is Not in Vain](#)” by The Porter’s Gate (4:20 min), also on our [Advent Playlist](#).¹
- Some people have a resilience and determination that is breath-taking, and Gary Haugen is one of those people. International Justice Mission is dedicated to rescuing people trapped in slavery and violence. The scope of it is huge, and the reason he doesn’t get overwhelmed is that for Gary, “[joy is the oxygen](#)” (4 min) that keeps him going.²
- In my conversation with Justin Welby, in the podcast episode, “[Suspicious of Joy](#)” (52 min)³, he spoke about the intensity of human suffering that crisis workers deal with and that he himself has experienced in comforting the tragically afflicted. He asks, how does one deal with the enormity of the need and how impossible it is to meet it? He says, “It actually doesn’t matter what percentage of the problem you’ve dealt with. Your job is not to solve the problem in most cases. Your job is to do what you can with the resources God has given you. And if that’s very, very little indeed, it’s very little indeed.” Listen for a very special and wide-ranging conversation that bubbles up with humor and wit.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPj3Kf7Dorw> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

2 <https://youtu.be/3nZNlfwH68U?si=IznkbaP--FK6g3M8>

3 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/archbishop-justin-welby-suspicious-of-joy>

From the Inside Out

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

—PSALM 16:11 (NRSV)

How many clowns can fit inside of a tiny clown car? Enough to delight a circus audience as the laws of physics are challenged and dozens of them happily pour out. How much delight can fit inside cramped spaces? Take Dr. Who and his timeship Tardis, which from the outside looks like a small kiosk, but inside it houses a control room, a library, a pool, an art gallery, a zoo, and on and on! C.S. Lewis captures this idea in *The Last Battle* when the loyal followers of Narnia are forced up a hill and into the door of a dark and tiny stable.

“Tirian looked round again and could hardly believe his eyes. There was the blue sky overhead, and grassy country spreading as far as he could see in every direction, and his new friends all round him laughing. ‘It seems, then,’ said Tirian, smiling himself, ‘that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places.’ ...

‘Yes,’ said Queen Lucy. ‘In our world too, a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.’”

In the child, Jesus we see immensity enfolded into one tiny human frame, who is Emmanuel, God with us. And in his presence we might find the fullness of all joy.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for this painful day (p. 112)

*But our God came to be cloaked
in our fragility,
in our humanity,
to know our pain from the inside out.*

REFLECT

1. Early church father Irenaeus paraphrased Psalm 16:11 when he wrote, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Irenaeus (and the Psalmist) says that our aliveness is directly related to our enjoyment of God’s goodness and presence. It’s a one-to-one connectedness that we can participate in through Jesus who shows us who God is. How do you experience this correlation—that in being your full self, you bring God glory and that in God’s presence we discover that same fullness?
2. Have you ever been in a group meeting where others are dominating the conversation and you’d really like to say something but can’t get a word in? All that we want to say, God actually *wants* to hear. Everything that is on our hearts. We might know this intellectually, but never have tested it out in real time, or trusted that it could actually be true. Say it all out loud to God who knows and sees and hears.

GOING DEEPER

- At my lowest ebb when the guard-rails came off of my life, my faith became something that was not just about an idea-God, but an actual God whose loving presence I felt. [Listen to this clip](#) (1.5 min)¹ from my conversation with Randy Balmer to hear me try to put words to this. (Heads up, my religion-professor roots are showing in my use of the word “Pietist.” It refers to an 18th century emergence of experiential devotion. You’ll feel very smart.) What are the ways that God speaks love into your world? Into your heart?
- God speaks to us in more ways we can count—through the beauty of nature, through scripture, through the life of Jesus and his followers, and in the still small voice that is God’s Holy Spirit sent to us. Spend some time doing whatever works best for you to be able to listen, to be attentive to God speaking, whether on a walk or in a quiet place, or just going about some mundane tasks. Don’t worry if it is only silence, or only a nudge and not actual words. It can be, but most often it is just an inkling. Wait and watch and listen.



¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG3sLDx8wk0>



A Glimpse of God

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us

—ROMANS 8:35, 37-39 (NLT)

So often when people are going through difficult seasons they ask: Where is God? And just as often, we forget that God is always with us—through all of the beautiful *and* the terrible.

I wish God would show up with a big neon sign announcing God's presence, or storm in with an army to make things right, or perform a healing miracle right when I ask for it. But more often, God shows up in small merciful glimpses of joy and love. The presence of a friend. An encouraging word at the right time. The beauty of a sunset after a long day.

God is with us in the wonder and tears, through the sorrows and celebrations, through the amazement and disbelief of life. As theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it." May you have the eyes to see the presence of God in the midst of whatever it is you're facing today.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for a little boost in the morning (p. 48)

Resurrection has happened again today—you made the sun rise, and brought love to the world already, in the shape of a cross. The hardest work is already done.

The work that remains is simply more of it: more love, more trust, more faith in the unseen pleasure you take just gazing at us, sitting here.

REFLECT

1. Have you ever asked or wondered, “Where is God in this situation”? What were you going through?
2. Galatians 5:22-23 describes the signs of the Spirit as joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, love, and self control. Sometimes God works through miracles. And sometimes God is present through small moments of God’s Spirit. During that difficult season, did you experience God through one of these mysterious ways?
3. Where do you see God in your life right now? Through the love of a friend? Joy of a grandchild? The goodness or beauty of nature around you?

GOING DEEPER

- Did you know that the song “Joy to the World” was not written about the birth of Jesus in Luke 2? This song was actually written by Isaac Watts in 1719 about Psalm 98, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises” (Psalm 98:4). The hymn was written to celebrate Christ’s second coming more than the birth of Christ. Yet, it has become one of the most popular Christmas hymns. In many traditions, it is the last song you sing during the Christmas Eve service, often the congregation will light candles and sing “Joy to the World” right as the clock strikes 12:01am.
- Take time to read the words of “[Joy to the World](https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come)”¹ while reflecting on all that you have learned about joy this week. Here are more ideas to help you think deeper about the words of this song:
 - How can you “prepare room” in your heart for God? Is there space and time in your schedule to notice the presence of God in your life?
 - Read Psalm 98:7-8 and reflect on the invitation to all creation (us too!): “Let heaven and nature sing.”
 - Did you know the “curse” mentioned in verse three is referring to the “curse” of Genesis 3:17, when Adam eats of the apple, and God curses the ground? There are many interpretations and perspectives on this curse and its consequences, but this song sings of hope: blessing will flow into all the world “as far as the curse is found” (good and bad, light or dark, awful and amazing). There is no place that God’s blessings will not reach when the Kingdom of God has fully arrived.
 - How might the “nations prove” the glory of God’s righteousness?

1 https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come

Bless this *Love-Filled* Advent



A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home.

—FROM THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS BY G. K. CHESTERTON

* <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

An Architecture of Love

Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?...Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

—2 SAMUEL 7:5,11 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

—LUKE 1:26-27 (NRSV)

All of us are builders at heart. As kids we build forts from cardboard. We huddle under blankets thrown over tables. We revel in the discovery of what our hands can make with just Play-Doh or Lego. And so, when King David decided it was time to build God a house for worship (2 Samuel 7:5,11), God turns the tables. God promises that David and his descendants will build a house that would be a strong refuge forever, one built on the tiniest of frames. The child Jesus, born in a stable of the house and lineage of David, would be the sign and the promise of a Kingdom where truth reigns, where hope is reborn.

Christmas Eve is the call to all of us who long to come home. To be where someone loves us best of all. Where we belong. And that is exactly what God has built for us. An architecture of love whose beauty is deep enough, immense enough for all of us to

crawl into with all of our needs and our confusion, our longings and our fears. Big enough to encompass the whole world. Because God's house of love has come to reconfigure our reality. Though we can't see the whole of it, in coming to earth God is showing us what love is, and the truth that God will not abandon us, nor this good earth. For look! There in the animal's feeding trough lies a baby king with healing in his wings.



PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your grandkids.

- Here is a chance to share Advent at your Christmas Eve gathering. Whatever you are doing today or wherever you find yourself, invite those around you to join in with the reading and lighting of the Advent candle.
- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Luke 2:1-7** aloud.
- Light all four purple candles and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 222) as a prayer:

*“Are you the one who is to come,
or shall we look for another?”*
—Matthew 11:3, ESV

God, we are waiting for love,
not the simple kind
or the sweep-you-off-your-feet kind,
but the absurd kind.

The kind wrapped in rags,
resting in a bucket of animal feed.
Love enough to save us all.

Blessed are we who look for Love
deeper, fuller, truer—than we have ever known,
than we could have ever hoped for.

Blessed are we who seek you,
the light that dawned so long ago
in that dark stable.
Love given.
Love received.

Receive this gift, dear one.
Love has come for you.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is your favorite Christmas carol? What does it say to you about the meaning of Christmas?
2. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” This is a line from the Christmas carol, “[O Little Town of Bethlehem](#).” How does Christmas Eve awaken hopes? Fears?
3. Amid all the expectations of Christmas, think of yourself as a little kid on Christmas Eve. What hope might your heart stretch to embrace this Christmas? Ask Jesus to meet you there.
4. Read G.K. Chesterton’s gorgeous poem, “[The House of Christmas](#).” Notice how tender and precarious the house of Christmas is.²



1 https://hymnary.org/text/o_little_town_of_bethlehem

2 <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/the-house-of-christmas-gk-chesterton/>



Bless this *Christmas*



Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!

O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

—O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL, TRANS. FREDERICK OAKELEY (1841)



* <http://q-r.to/christmas-spotify-playlist>

God With Us

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

—JOHN 1:1-5 (NRSVUE)

In this community, we talk a lot about before and afters. There is a life *before*. In the Before Times, jokes might have come easily and you might be quick to laugh. A time when it felt easy to make plans far off in the future and hope was easy to come by.

And there is a life *after*. Which might be what you are experiencing today.

The first Christmas since the divorce or after the kids started their own family traditions. The first Christmas with one less stocking to fill, or perhaps realizing the perfect gift didn't actually fix the broken relationship. Your house may be lacking the joy (or people) you had hoped for. Maybe today you woke up and decided to go back to sleep because living in the *after* is hard work (we understand and we are so sorry). No matter what you are experiencing, today, we also recognize a different before and after.

Advent is a season of divine anticipation. A *before* marked by waiting with bated breath for Jesus to be born, for the world to be made right. And Christmas is the ultimate *after*. One marked by realized joy and celebration. As we finally place baby Jesus in our na-

tivity scenes and light the Christ candle on our Advent wreaths, we are reminded that Jesus' birth means that God is with us, the Emmanuel.

God is with us in our before and afters. *God is with us* in our pain and joy. *God is with us* during our beginnings and endings. *God is with us* when we find the courage to hope for a bigger story even in our own impossible situations. *God is with us* when we are surprised by the joy that embraces our sorrow and loss. *God is with us* when we feel a peace that passes all understanding, even when our lives have come undone. *God is with us* even when our circumstances don't change. *God is with us* when we realize God's love for us, so much that God sent Jesus to us.

The best news is that the love, peace, joy, and hope that comes with God's presence doesn't have to end when the clock strikes midnight tonight. It can't be boxed up and put in storage until next year. We can practice recognizing, embracing, and looking for the presence of God throughout the year. For our God is always with us from this day until the end.

This is the day we've been waiting for. Let us rejoice.

PRACTICING CHRISTMAS TOGETHER

- Gather your family together maybe before opening presents, or use your Advent wreath as the centerpiece on your Christmas dinner table. If you are alone this Christmas, find someone to FaceTime or take this peaceful moment to feel God's presence.
- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Luke 2:8-20** aloud.
- Light all the candles around the wreath, saving the Christ candle (the white candle in the center) for last and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 224) as a prayer:

God, this is a kind of magic
the way this day shines so strangely,
how it sparkles beyond our understanding.

(Yes, it was a disaster
the way the food turned out this year
and how what's-her-face said (I told her not to)
What shouldn't be repeated.
Again this year.)

But, somehow, this day
never fails to awaken a longing
to love well—or at least better—
all those here with us, and those far away,

and to remember with gratitude
those now gone, gone, gone and missed.

What is this mystery?

Our God who set the world spinning
should come down for this one reason:
to love us into a newness.
Not for gain, nor our capitalist fantasies,
but the hope that freely, lavishly,
that we might learn to see, feel, and live Christ's love.
Thank you.
Christ the Giver and the Gift.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What have you discovered about recognizing the presence of God in your life? Share a time where you've experienced the hope, peace, love, or joy of God this season of Christmas (it can be big or small).
2. What are the gifts (hope, peace, love, joy) of Christmas that you want to cherish and carry with you throughout the year (not just on Christmas Day)?
3. How will you share these gifts with others? How can you be the presence of God in other people's lives by sharing hope, peace, love, and joy? By sharing these gifts we help others to live into the "after" of Christmas Day.

GOING DEEPER

- Today, be present to God in your life by looking for, embracing, and cherishing all the ways that God is surprising you with hope, peace, joy, and love. These are signs of God's presence in your life. List how you have felt the presence of God this day and throughout the season of Advent.
- NT Wright and Kate had a rich discussion about how God works with us through the hard things in life. [Watch a clip from the conversation here](https://youtu.be/ybR3TSRdVI8?si=Gn73nNNtM4aasdw_) (5 min).¹



1 Clip: https://youtu.be/ybR3TSRdVI8?si=Gn73nNNtM4aasdw_
Full Episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-mystery-of-god>

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

—MATTHEW 2:1-2 (NKJV)

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. Gentler.

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.

We've put together a Christmastide playlist for you to listen to over the next twelve days.

Christmastide Playlist:

A separate playlist of CHRISTMAS songs to be played through Jan 6th.



Some of the songs are 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. Take courage! If you have had a hectic Advent or Christmas Day this year, may this Christmastide be a time for you to release the grip of anticipation and walk toward joy.

* <http://q-r.to/christmas-spotify-playlist>

AVAILABLE 01.23.24

