

Don't Treat Jesus Like a Baby - A Deeper Experience of Advent

Thirty-Two Advent Devotionals (*rough and*



unedited) by Lori Stanley Roeleveld

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All content first appeared as posts on *Deeper with Jesus in Rhode Island* or *Lori Stanley Roeleveld* at www.loriroeleveld.com

Cover photo by Hannah Sojourner Grace Roeleveld

A Note from the Author

Dear Fellow Adventurers:

I love the challenge of seeing Jesus anew every Advent. While some aspects of the season don't change, my life and the world around me are in a constant state of transformation. If you're like me, it's easy to focus on the busy-ness of Christmas, missing Jesus along the way.

During Advent 2013, I posted one seasonal blog each day. The response to those posts was tremendous so I've compiled these thirty-two into a devotional for readers to use beginning the first Sunday of Advent and continuing through New Year's Eve. My prayer is that by reading them and the suggested scriptures, you'll carve out a moment each day where you connect with Jesus.

This is my gift to you, loved ones. If you find it meaningful, please let others know they, too, can receive it free by subscribing to my blog at www.loriroeleveld.com.

Let me know what you think. I love to hear from readers. Drop by the blog. I'll be posting new Advent material there. Know that I'm praying for you through the holidays.

When you read my books, *Running from a Crazy Man (and other adventures traveling with Jesus)*, *Red Pen Redemption*, or *Jesus and the Beanstalk (Overcoming Your Giants and Living a Fruitful Life)*, *The Art of Hard Conversations: Biblical Tools for the Tough Talks that Matter*, I'd love to hear your response to them, as well! There's a team of people praying for readers of that book - that God will grant all of us the courage to continue in the adventure to His great heart.

Merry Christmas, loved ones. Here's to safe travels and great adventures in the year to come.

Mercy and Grace, Lori

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A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 1: Wrestling Season

It's here! Wrestling season is upon us!

Yes, it's the season when Christians become wrestlers. Every Advent, we struggle with how best to honor this time we've designated to celebrate the human birth of the Son of God.

Some will bemoan the commercialism that has overtaken the holiday and scale back. Others will spare no tinsel to remind others that Jesus is the reason for the season. They'll bake, decorate, carol, and quote Linus all in the spirit of commemorating the coming of the One we love. Still, others will use the season to provoke the culture with the gospel. They will write letters to the editor protesting the banishment of nativity scenes at town halls, decry the secularization of tradition, or lecture cashiers on politically correct greetings. Finally, others will ignore the season in honor of Christ, intent on celebrating Him every day, refusing to distinguish one from another.

All will wonder if we're getting it right. Is Jesus pleased with our choice? Is our focus correct? Do we reflect Him well for those who don't know Him? I, too, wrestle with how best during Advent to both live my faith in private and to express it in the marketplace.

One key I've found is to meditate on a title of Jesus we rarely reference the rest of the year. Somewhere among the boxed ornaments and nativity scenes rests a glitter-specked name we store away with the rest of the Christmas decorations. *Emmanuel*. God with us. On the first day of Advent, it's wise to unpack this name, brush off the remnants of seasons past, and consider it anew. Jesus is God with us. His choice. His idea, this being *with*.

Other religions promote elusive gods, distant deities, punishing, fickle, impersonal idols who must be placated, cajoled or appeased. Not us. We serve a living God who crossed unimaginable barriers to be WITH us. He sought US out. He made the first move. God the incarnate initiates. This flipped focus faith is ours because **we follow the only God we didn't create**. The One God who revealed Himself to us.

Using the name Emmanuel throughout the season facilitates my celebration of Him. Meditating on the name Emmanuel. Rolling it around in my thoughts. Speaking it often. Reading scriptures around this name. All this, reminds me of God *with* us.

I create opportunities throughout the day to express this "being with" by designating intentional time with Him. I don't limit it to one morning quiet time. **Advent extravagance inspires me to be just as extravagant with the time I devote to the Lord**. Just as signs of the season burst forth from the media to my mailbox, I allow Him to burst into my thinking moment after

moment after moment. I am consciously WITH the One who sacrificed everything to make it possible for me to be WITH Him.

God with us. That's huge. So huge, it will take me a lifetime of Advents to comprehend. Starting with this one.

Remember: Let Advent extravagance inspire you to be just as extravagant with the time you devote to the Lord.

Read: Matthew 1:22-23

Pray: Ask God to show you the places in your week He's waiting for you to invite Him to be with you.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 2: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

They were a people longing,
yearning to escape captivity.

For as long as they could remember, there had been chains – chains, shackles, and heavy yokes
weighing them down,
until even their young children were crushed beneath their father’s bonds.

At first, they had cried out
angry protests, shaking fists, and proud plans of revolution.

Now, they were worn, beaten down, and crushed.

Their throats parched, their voices weak, and their spirits dry as the dust in their fields.

There had been messiahs
proven false, demonstrated impotent, escorted to the town line,
banished from sight

Along with every hope of rescue, salvation, or redemption.

They lived in darkness
and no light appeared on their horizon.

It was to these ragged hearts,
skinned and hung to dry on Satan’s line
that God sent a whispered communique:

“Prepare
for the arrival of comfort.”

Those who received the message
ran their rent hearts up the standard
like battle-torn flags,
like lightning rods designed to attract starlight
from a particular star,
so the Lord would know He was welcome to reside
even in this dark place.
O Come, Emmanuel, to rest, to dwell, to be where I am today.

All of my life I have been yearning.
As a child, I yearned to belong.
As a young woman, I yearned for love.
Later on, I yearned for children and then I yearned for them to know the Lord.
Throughout, my soul has yearned for release – from sin, from the cares of this world, from
disaster, disease, and distress.

As if my spirit is a small Israel crying out for the Messiah to come.

He has come, He is here, and He is coming again. Yet, my soul yearns, always, to know Him
more.

He hears my cry amidst the cries of all His people – Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us.
Save me.

My flag flies with the rest, signaling my distress
so that when He promises comfort, leveled mountains, and His glory revealed,
I answer, too, “Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Come!”

Do you yearn, too? Does your heart long for freedom and release? Do you cry out for
deliverance for others?

Ingest His words of comfort and let them feed your soul.

Know that when He comes, He comes for you. Nothing can stand in the way of your deliverance. He is that for which you have yearned for so long. As He came for His people, so He has come for you.

Remember: Ingest His words of comfort and let them feed your soul.

Read: Isaiah 40:1-5

Pray: Pray for the people in your world and around the world who long for deliverance from the bondage of sin. Pray for Emmanuel to come to them this season.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 3: A Baby on the Way

Expecting.

What do you live expecting? Some people have abandoned their expectations while others show up every day expecting. Living expectantly sharpens the senses, pushing a soul closer towards life's cutting edge, and heightens every experience.

I remember vivid snapshots of moments from when I was expecting my first child.

Watching the stick change color just weeks after my wedding. Oh boy, do I remember that moment! I wanted children, desperately, but this wasn't the plan – not yet. This baby wasn't scheduled according to my timing. Until that moment, I thought I had life under control. God had His own plan and I was thankful to have nine months to prepare.

Then, the slow-motion moment when I hung up from speaking with my doctor. I was only eight months along but my body needed this baby out now. Head to the hospital, he'd instructed. We'll induce labor. I glanced around my apartment knowing that life would completely change before I returned.

Finally, nineteen hours of labor. The rush of excitement welcoming my son into the world. Alone with him that night watching him breathe, snow forming a blanket on the city, I panicked. I'd grown accustomed to expecting. I'd focused nine months on preparing for labor and childbirth. That was over. Now what? Now I beheld new life.

Humanity, too, is expecting. We've had years of warning to prepare for Christ's return. At some point, His plan will interrupt all others, coming upon us like labor.

For an expectant woman, nine months can feel like an eternity. Even though she knows it will happen, it can feel like she is waiting for a moment that will never arrive. Even when labor begins, the reality of a new life bursting onto the planet will not hit her until she holds the child in her arms.

The world is like a woman in her last trimester. Pregnant with God's plan for so long, weary and wondering if eternity will ever truly arrive. Jesus tells us the signs that labor has begun and every mother from Eve to Mary to me knows that once labor begins it takes over and there is no way out but through. It will all be worth it for the new life at the other end – if we have prepared.

These are things to speak about this advent season. As we hear of wars and rumors of wars, remind people that the world is beginning to feel the pangs of labor. When others mention Mary

and her baby remind them that that baby is due again only this time, He rides in on the clouds. Speak of the need for preparation, not for giving and receiving gifts but for the time to come.

It will come.

Just as the Messiah arrived in His time back in Bethlehem, so He will arrive at the end of the age. Just as mothers read “What to Expect When You’re Expecting,” so we should be studying God’s Word because we are expecting His return.

Speak of these things with others this advent season, loved ones. Make the most of every opportunity.

Remember: Humanity, too, is expecting. We’ve had years of warning to prepare for Christ’s return. At some point, His plan will interrupt all others, coming upon us like labor.

Read: Romans 8:18-25, Matthew 24

Pray: Pray for opportunities this season to remind people that Jesus is coming again.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 4: Heaven is Not Sponsored by Hallmark

Have you ever found it hard to wake up in the morning and greet another day?

Ever wake up weeping? Full of anxiety? Certain the day held no promise except that it would be a challenge to endure from one end to the other? Has it ever been that the encouraging words of others, rather than a blessing, felt like burning acid poured on your already scalded spirit? As if the promises of God were intended for others but not for you?

You're not alone (although I know it feels that way).

Advent ushers in the holiday season. While, for some, that means favorite decorations, special foods, and cherished traditions, for others it means a magnifying glass thrust over the deficiencies in their lives. The white, hot sun of the upcoming season bears down on them like a lasered sunbeam on a helpless ant.

Sorry, we aren't hiring.

No, I won't be home for Christmas.

I'm leaving you. I can't make it to the New Year. I don't care what it will do to the kids; I have to think about me.

The landlord won't extend until December. We'll have to find a shelter now.

For people just barely surviving because of any number of situations, the holidays appear like a different flavor of torture. Now, they're not only in pain but they need to smile through it. Now, they're not only depressed but they will have a front row seat to others' happiness. Now, if they show up, they'll just ruin the good time for everyone else. And within the family of God, this can be just as hard, if not harder.

You have to trust God. Don't you believe He'll provide for you?

Keep praying and waiting. I'm sure things will turn around.

God loves you and has a special plan for your life. You need to praise Him, serve others, forget your own problems, give it all over to Him, be positive, count your blessings, repent of your depression, think of the reason behind the season, keep your eyes on Him, and come to our pageant.

People mean well. They do, but suffering has an isolation factor that's hard to penetrate from either side. That doesn't mean, though, that we should give up trying.

If you're suffering, be honest with God. Read Jeremiah 20 if you need a blueprint for this. Jeremiah knew how to throw down agony before the throne of grace. Whatever you're thinking or feeling, God knows already so just lay it on Him. He can take it.

Hang out with safe people and avoid toxic ones. You know - the ones who really don't understand. Don't judge them, though. You've no idea what their story is behind that sweater with the Christmas puppy on the front. They may hurt like you but they've conditioned themselves to stick on a bow and smile.

Also, remember that heaven isn't sponsored by Hallmark. Jesus doesn't command us to be especially happy during Advent. God doesn't frown on you for suffering during the holidays. He doesn't take a break from real issues because it's December. He hasn't lost you in the crowd because He has a list of things to do for the holiday. He isn't limited to focusing on the people with "real" problems nor the ones who have their acts together.

God is WITH us. He's not packing for a holiday cruise just for Him. He hangs out in homeless shelters, homes with foreclosure notices and no heat, kitchens with empty cupboards, hearts with fading hope, offices full of pressure, minds distraught with fear, and relationships at the breaking point.

God knew where He was sending His son. He's not shocked by our pain, our problems, or our suffering. He isn't repulsed by our humanity. It's why He came.

He's so here.

God is at work during Advent as much as the rest of the year. He's with you. He's not afraid to enter your suffering heart. Let Him in.

Remember: God knew where He was sending His son. Our pain, our problems, and our suffering do not shock him. Our humanity doesn't repulse Him. It's why He came.

Read: Jeremiah 20:14-18 and Isaiah 61:1-3

Pray: Pour your hurt and pain out before the Lord. Lament, grieve, moan, and cry. Trust Him with your deepest hurts and ask Him to hold you in His arms through this season. Intercede for others who suffer and feel alone during Advent.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 5: Don't Make Your Children's Dreams Come True

If you believe all the commercials and holiday specials, Christmas is about making dreams come true. Funny, no one told Jesus. He didn't come to work for Walt Disney; He came to fulfill His Father's will.

Ask Mary. It wasn't her dream to start her married life under a cloud of suspicion. Ask Joseph. It wasn't his dream to have his friends wonder if he was a fornicator or a chump. It wasn't this young couple's dream to spend years running and hiding from a powerful and angry king. Nor was it the dream of families in Judea to watch Herod's soldiers kill their infant sons.

Jesus didn't come to make dreams come true. He came to teach us to dream better dreams.

He arrived a poor child so we knew He understood the pain of going without. He endured rejection, suffering, and trials so we knew He understood our distress, too.

He was misunderstood, betrayed, arrested, beaten, mocked, and humiliated. Those He loved abandoned Him. He faced an unjust conviction and died at the hands of arrogant and manipulative blind guides – while His mother watched. Christmas isn't about dreams – not the dreams we normally dream.

It's a celebration of God's love for us made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. God came and lived with us. That wasn't a dream; it was real. **It wasn't about making our dreams come true. It was about delivering us from the lesser dreams of this world so we are free to dream eternal dreams.**

He is the originator of dreams, the great Dream Weaver, but we have come under the curse of one who convinced us to trade our glory for lesser dreams. That is why we spend the holidays at Stuff-Mart instead of caring for those in need.

If you love your children this Christmas, don't work to make their dreams come true. Instead, teach them to dream the best dream – that of a life with Jesus Christ – one that never ends.

Remember: Jesus didn't come to make dreams come true. He came to teach us to dream better dreams.

Read: I Peter 1:3-9

Pray: Do you have a dream to release to Jesus? Do it today. Trust it over to Him.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 6: Joseph Awakens to a New Dream

It's playing in all the best stores. *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*. You know the song. If you believe Hollywood, Christmas is about making dreams come true. Which is nice, you know, since we all have dreams.

Joseph had dreams.

He'd reached adulthood, learned a trade, found a woman to love - Mary, a devoted and godly girl. I'll bet he had dreams of a simple life – steady work in Nazareth, a home, sons and daughters who love the Lord.

Then, Joseph's dream unraveled.

Mary was with child – not his. Joseph's a good man, a quiet man, a loving man, and so he makes plans to divorce her quietly as his dream slips from his grasp.

But, God also had a dream for Joseph's life.

While Joseph slept, an angel of the Lord appeared to him with assurance – Mary bore a Holy child. Messiah. Long-awaited Savior of his people. God's dream for Joseph's life included trusting Joseph with His only son. Joseph did what the angel commanded and took Mary home to be his wife even though things weren't playing out in accordance with his original dreams.

No man dreams of taking home a wife and “having no union with her” until she gives birth to someone else's child. No man dreams of hearing whispers about his wife in the tavern or having the locals hide their glances when he passes. No man dreams of starting a new life under a cloud of public suspicion and derision.

No man dreams of traveling with his pregnant wife to a distant city under government edict and having little money and no place for her to rest. No man dreams of making a bed of hay among the livestock when it comes his wife's time to deliver his first child.

No man dreams of this but this was God's dream for Joseph.

Of course, no man would ever have dreamed that a star would appear in the heavens to herald the birth of his firstborn son nor that a choir of angels would make the birth announcement to shepherds who would seek him. That strangers would offer their worship to the little one swaddled and cradled in his young wife's arms.

Nor could he have dreamed of the danger the little one was in or the adventure on which they would embark to protect him, this baby whom the God of the Heavens entrusted into Joseph's earthly care.

This was a dream he could not have dreamed but in surrendering to God's plan for his life, Joseph lived a better dream. This can be true for us all.

If we surrender to Him our dreams for ourselves, we awaken to His dreams for us and live out the story He wrote for our lives which is one single thread woven into a greater story – one we will tell into eternity.

Joseph loved God and found a life he could never have dreamed for himself. Do you have dreams? Have you seen dreams crushed and lost? Are you willing to surrender your dreams to live the dream God has for you?

Maybe this year, instead of dreaming of a white Christmas, you can dream His dream for your life. One day, we'll all gather with Joseph and swap stories of amazing dreams come true.

Remember: This was a dream he could not have dreamed but in surrendering to God's plan for his life, Joseph lived a better dream. This can be true for us all.

Read: I Corinthians 1:9, Matthew 1:18-25

Pray: Intercede for the people in your life who have woken up to a different dream than they planned. Pray for Jesus to help them see His hand in what is happening.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 7: Old Soldiers Never Die

Howard took a step up the ladder, wincing when it creaked. “Grandma’s been hearing critters in that attic. See anything, boy?”

Alice hollered. “Not one more move, Howard. You leave the climbing to Tommy.”

“Fine.” He grimaced but then Tommy’s feet appeared. “You got something?”

“No squirrels, but I found this.” Tommy passed down a rectangular package wrapped in Christmas paper.

Howard set it on the hall table, bracing the ladder as the teen descended.

“Did I spoil someone’s surprise?” Tommy asked.

Howard sniffed, shaking his head. He folded up the ladder door.

“What gives?” Tommy asked.

Howard put a finger to his lips, grabbed the box, and motioned Tommy into the study. Gently, Howard unwrapped a faded G.I.Joe action figure, popular decades earlier. Tommy examined it then raised his eyebrows, puzzled.

Scratching his bristly cheek, Howard said, “I bought this for your father when he was, I don’t know, ten.” He nodded toward the door. “You know how your grandmother feels about war toys but, it was all your dad wanted that year. I meant to surprise him.”

“What happened?”

“Got word on Christmas Eve about my brother. Vietnam was almost over but no one told the land mine that took Trevor.” Howard paused. “Guess I just forgot about this old G.I.Joe.”

Tommy ran a finger over the crackling plastic window. “Dad told me Uncle Trevor’s death is what made him decide to become a missionary, did you know that?”

Howard nodded. “Losing someone young changes you. Made his mother proud.”

“Funny,” said Tommy, “when he died in that church fire in Indonesia, Grandma called Dad a casualty of war.”

“Yup, battle for the kingdom.” Howard sighed then straightened his shoulders. “Keep him. Let it remind you that we’re all soldiers on a vast battlefield. Always remember what and for whom you’re fighting, Tommy.

Howard watched his grandson flip over the little tag still taped to the box. “Merry Christmas, son. Love, Dad.”

Remember: We’re all soldiers on a vast battlefield. Always remember what and for whom you’re fighting.

Read: Ephesians 6:10-18, Isaiah 9:5-7

Pray: Pray for those separated from home and loved ones by war or assignment on the mission field during the holidays.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 8: God Unswaddled

'Tis the season for taking offense.

You know how when you've been married for a while, there are some discussions that feel like déjà vu. When they begin, you think, "Haven't we had this conversation? Can we cut to the chase this time?"

That's how I feel at Advent when Christians complain about the world's response to the holiday. What will bother believers this year? Will it be the commercialism, the way sales clerks greet us, the rising attention the White House gives to other religious holidays, or how the governor refers to the Christmas tree in the rotunda?

I say let's skip it this year. That's right. Skip the complaints. Skip the offense. Let's try something different.

Receive all greetings with grace. Before you lecture the pimple-faced kid at Walmart or the radio broadcaster or the local politician about the real reason for the season, ask yourself if you've ever concerned yourself for five minutes about the state of his or her soul before this.

In the face of a constantly changing culture capable of finding new ways to mess with Christmas, let's choose to take back the agenda by responding with a lasting message this season. Here's the one I suggest: Worry less about how we remember Jesus' first coming and spend more time preparing for His next arrival. That one's going to be a doozy and the cards won't be pretty.

I know we've been a long time waiting for Jesus to come again. It's natural for the world to scoff and for the church to become complacent but that's exactly how it was the first time, too.

Israel was tired of waiting for the Messiah when Jesus finally arrived. By the time Mary learned she was carrying God's son, some rabbis were teaching that the Messiah referred to in the scriptures was, perhaps, a metaphor calling each of us to save our portion of the world. Others had grown so accustomed to waiting; they forgot to expect Him to actually arrive.

Notice the preponderance of "Mary's" in the New Testament. It was a popular name in Israel because it means "bitter or bitterness." The Israelites were declaring to God, "We're tired of waiting for you to save us, God. We're restless and angry. Maybe we should try to save ourselves."

There were Jews trying to do that. The Zealots believed in rising up against their oppressors and fighting Rome for freedom. One of the twelve disciples, Simon, was a Zealot. I'm sure he wasn't

popular with his cohorts when he announced that the actual Messiah had come so he was done with swords and conspiracies. He had a greater task.

That's exactly how I feel right now. I've decided to spend less energy complaining about how people remember Jesus' first coming and more time warning them of His return. I don't know when He's coming again. I don't know if we are in THE end times. I do know that every generation is closer to the end than the last.

I also know that the admonition to "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" was not just about receiving a baby into the world. That baby is all grown up now. He matured, lived, died, rose again, and ascended. He stands beside the Father awaiting word to come again.

Revelation 19 describes His return. Take a look. That's no swaddled baby in a manger. That's God un-swaddled and we'd best be ready to face Him!

Don't worry about whether or not you're prepared for this Christmas season – worry whether or not you're prepared for the season to come – the End of the Age and the return of Jesus Christ.

Put THAT message on your Christmas card and mail it, loved ones.

Remember: Don't worry about whether or not you're prepared for this Christmas season – worry whether or not you're prepared for the season to come – the End of the Age and the return of Jesus Christ.

Read: Revelation 19:11-16

Pray: Pray for opportunities during Advent to deliver the message that just as the long-awaited Messiah finally arrived in Israel, so, too, His long-awaited second coming will happen. We should prepare.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 9: Advent in the Real World Where Good People Die

Advent would feel so much more spiritual if I could skip my day job to sit home and practice being holy. Monday mornings feel like a glimpse of eternity without God.

For many, the holidays are a season of lights and expectations. Those of us working in social service, however, face a season of faulty wiring and dashed hopes washed down with whiskey and more than one black eye. You get the picture. It can be challenging to find the spirit of Advent in the line to recertify for cash assistance. It gets to the families we work with and sometimes, it can get to us.

One year during Advent, I learned of a colleague's death.

Sudden.

Unexpected.

Alone in a hotel room.

She was gone. Like a candle extinguished with a pinch.

I stared at her beautiful, smiling postage stamp face on the online obituary for a long time, as if I could will her back. Feeling the weight of sadness, loss, and my utter powerlessness to fix this planet or even make it bearable for some people.

In that moment, I needed a glimpse of God because I needed to remember there is a future beyond this one we see.

There. Has. To. Be. More.

The men and women of the Bible needed that glimpse of glory as well.

As John the Baptist prepared people for Jesus to come, He referred to Him as the Lamb of God. And this He was. The unblemished Lamb of God. Perfection Incarnate. Worthy of all worship, glory, laud, and honor. He dropped from heaven like a whistling, wet stone landing in a muddy swamp, but when He ascended to heaven, Jesus inhabited His full glory.

I want to be near that glory. I want to wrap that glory around me. Especially on the days a friend disappears from this life because she's seen too much, felt too alone, and strapped the weight of others' burdens around her neck like an anvil on a chain.

When the apostle John glimpsed heaven, he saw God on His throne and in His right hand was a scroll sealed with seven seals.

An angel cried out, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” John wept because no one on heaven or earth was found who was worthy to open the scroll.

One of the elders comforted John. “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Weep no more.

Be comforted.

The Lamb of God, the Lion of Judah – He is worthy.

Remember: Jesus dropped from heaven like a whistling, wet stone landing in a muddy swamp, but when He ascended to heaven, He inhabited His full glory.

Read: Revelation 5

Pray: For those who work with the poor, those who are depressed, and those who grieve that God will give them a glimpse of His glory to sustain them through this season.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 10: What Not to Say to an Angel

When God breaks in
it's never convenient.

And while it often means good news for the world,
it doesn't always mean good news for you -
the bumbling human He's chosen for a special task.

Like Zechariah.

Priest. Righteous follower of God. Observant Jew. Husband.

Old man.

Childless.

Unable to produce an heir.

Done.

Waiting for his call home.

One day, he's at work.

Kneeling behind a heavy drapery inside the holy of holies making intercession for the people of Israel.

It's a big deal, this task.

Everyone else is waiting on the other side of the curtain.

It's a holy thing, he's doing. Burning incense. Mediating before God for the sinners on the other side of the curtain.

All at once, he's not alone.

I'm not sure why modern people want to see angels. Anyone in the Bible who ever saw one was majorly freaked out by the sight. Scared. Overwhelmed. Shaking in their shoes.

Usually, the first words out of angels' mouths are "Don't be afraid." That should tell you something. Even more, because people still seem afraid even after the angels tells them not to be.

So, the good news this angel brings is that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, is going to have a child.

Okay, good news because they've waited a loooooonnnnggggg time but freaky, too, because, you know, they're old. Picture the oldest couple you know finding out they're going to have a baby. Weird, right?

The bad news is that Zechariah doesn't react brilliantly when the angel delivers his news. He wants to know how he can be sure what he's hearing is actually going to happen.

I've never seen an angel, okay, so I can't really judge, but I can tell you that if you're alone behind a curtain kneeling before an altar burning incense and an angelic being appears at your side and gives you a message from God, the wrong thing to say next is "Prove it, man."

Zechariah ends up with a nine-month involuntary vow of silence, which must have made the ensuing experience for Elizabeth even more of a strange adventure.

When God breaks in

it's never convenient.

And while it often means good news for the world,

it doesn't always mean good news for you -

the bumbling human He's chosen for a special task.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had lived righteous lives before God and in their old age, He took them on a sleigh ride.

Are you feeling as though too much life has passed for God to choose you for adventure?

Not so.

Take a trip to the altar this advent season, loved one. Remember that if an angel appears with a message, just nod, and say, "Yes. I'm ready to follow. Let's go."

Remember: When God breaks in, it's never convenient. And while it often means good news for the world; it doesn't always mean good news for you - the bumbling human He's chosen for a special task.

Read: Luke 1: 5-25

Pray: Ask God to prepare you to receive whatever task He's planned for YOUR adventure.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 11: The Stretch Armstrong Devotional

God exists outside of time. The Great I Am, who was and is and is to come. He's capable of being in yesterday, tomorrow, and today without wanting to drive His car off a bridge.

I am not.

Which is why I agonize over the Christmas season. My kids are in their twenties. Healthy. Happy. Present. Planning to be with me for Christmas. If I could let myself abide in the now, no one would have to hide our knives.

Instead, part of me tries to return to the past when they were small, wide-eyed, and I could provide everything to make their Christmas dreams come true in bright packages and plates of frosted treats.

A foolish piece of my soul clings sharp-nailed to the memory of footie pajama mornings marked by squeals of delight, the scent of cookie-breath, and mountains of Legos amid scraps of penguin wrapping paper.

An equally witless part of my heart anticipates Christmas's to come when they'll be off with their own families or when our table will be missing a grandparent or two, nursing an ache for a future near enough to appear in my windshield.

Then, like a hapless sailor with one foot on the dock and one on the deck of a parting boat, I stretch myself beyond reason and am about to take a dive into the salty brine of my own irrational self-mortification.

God points a finger in my direction, moving it to indicate I should come closer and listen carefully. Then He reminds me that He is God. He was and is and is to come. I am human. Marooned in the now. Which should actually improve my situation.

Now, my children are present, healthy, happy, and here. Now, my parents are with us, engaged, and thriving. Now, Jesus is also here.

As He was before.

As He will be in the days to come.

“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Hebrews 1: 3a

He upholds the universe and my heart.

Are you straddling time? Are you trying to stretch yourself into a God-shaped version of you in an attempt to be in the past and the future, as well as now? That's why you're tired, loved one, and ready to snap.

I remember one Christmas there was a Stretch Armstrong toy under our tree. Stretch was entertaining but he had his limits. One day, my son tested him beyond his design and he snapped.

Are you testing yourself beyond your design? This Advent season, be in the now. It's where Jesus is and where you were designed to be until we enter the eternal now.

Remember: God upholds the universe and your heart.

Read: Hebrews 1:1-4, Revelation 1:9-20

Pray: Ask the Lord to help you remember to focus on the Now. Surrender the past to Him and trust Him with the future.

A Deeper Experience of Advent Day 12: When You're Invisible

Are you planning a holiday escape? Be careful. One thing we can never escape is ourselves.

No matter how loved we are

or how full our lives,

we're still solitary beings.

When you come right down to it,

we're often alone.

Some live alone.

Others are only alone in the dark

once everyone else has gone to sleep;

alone with their thoughts,

their solitary selves.

We make important decisions in those moments alone.

Lying in the dark before everyone else awakens,

staring at a screen in an office cubicle,

waiting in a hospital gown for a CT scan,

staring down a darkened driveway watching for headlights to appear.

Alone, we know who we are.

I remember lying on a cold table in an empty outpatient room

having just been informed that I was losing my unborn child,

my second in less than six months,

feeling so alone

making decisions about how to respond to this most unwelcome news,

keenly aware that God and who knows what other heavenly host were listening in on my internal dialog.

Funny, it didn't feel as though they were judging,
just waiting, witnessing, holding their collective heavenly breath.
Because, that's the truth of it, that even when we're alone -
we aren't.

We don't need social media outlets,
status updates, texts, posts, and tweets,
to be seen.

Hebrews 12 says a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us
and Psalm 139 tells us God knows our every thought.
We're visible from Heaven's throne.

Which is why I think God was so interested in shepherds.

Shepherds are the modern scene-stealers of the nativity story
but that would have baffled the people of Israel in Biblical times.

Shepherds were of no account.

They took shepherds for granted.

Shepherds were largely invisible and spent hours and hours
alone, but, clearly, not unseen.

God and the heavenly host witnessed their acts of bravery
and their tomfoolery;
overheard their bawdy songs
and their prayers;

knew when they cried for home,
and when they went out of their way to care for the sheep in their charge.
God didn't need social media
to inform Him which of them were His sheep
and which belonged to another fold.

Likewise,
contrary to the message of popular Christmas music,
it's Jesus who sees us when we're sleeping
and knows when we're awake.
What happens, unwitnessed by other humans, when we're alone
matters on an eternal level,
which is intended to be a comfort not a concern.

In a time when most people feel the only lives that matter are ones that are appreciated by the masses,
Christmas comes around to remind us
that God chose to send His Son before the invention of mass media.

He is a God who notices
devout teen-age girls,
shepherds with their flocks by night,
humble carpenters,
and wise men searching the scriptures for the truth.

Unnoticed on earth,
their faces appeared on the Jumbotron of Heaven
and they earned fame on the dimension that matters.

Are you alone?

No. Never.

Be encouraged or challenged by that information – whichever one moves you closer to Jesus.

Remember: We're visible from Heaven's throne.

Read: Hebrews 12: 1-2, Psalm 139

Pray: Ask God to remind you that He sees you, He knows you, and His eye is on you at all times.

A Deeper Experience of Advent Day 13: Rediscover God's Art

We're losing it. Have you noticed it, too?

I haven't wanted to bring it up

but it's true.

We're losing it and I want it back.

The art and the beauty.

The majesty.

The awe.

The Hallelujah.

The touch of God on our lives.

I want it all.

God's son, warm and swaddled,

blessing us by inhabiting our humanity.

Shepherds communing with angels.

A caravan of magi

camping out under the stars,

mapping our future by a change in the constellations;

outwitting a nervous king.

I believe, though, that we can recapture what we've lost

by meditating on His handiwork: one another.

If you have a choice this season

of communing with the television, a movie, a book, the mall
or
being with one, two, or a gathering of messy human beings -
choose the humans.

We are God's handiwork.

His art.

The expression of His creative mind.

His heart walking around on earth.

Rediscover God's art – Spend time with another human in His name.

The Hallelujah may be right under your nose.

Remember: We are God's handiwork. His art. The expression of His creative mind. His heart walking around on earth.

Read: Psalm 8

Pray: Ask God to open your eyes to His best work – the people in your world.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 14: Carly's Christmas Story – The Snow Globe

For some people, the holidays only intensify feelings of isolation and separation from others. This flash fiction piece tells **Carly's Christmas Story – The Snow Globe**.

The church counselor shifted forward in her chair as I searched for words. She asked me, “Like a snow globe? Explain that for me.”

I tried to find words for how I feel. “You know those snow globes people pull out at Christmas?”

She nodded.

“The world inside that globe seems beautiful, perfect, but if I tried to touch it or become part of it – it would shatter. To become a part of that world I would have to destroy it and then I would see that it was really fake after all. It's only beautiful if I leave it untouched.”

“That's how you see God's love for you?”

I nodded and stared out the window. She won't understand. Church people never get me. At least I can tell mom I tried. Snow was falling but that just deepened the ache inside. There's no hope for me. I know it and she knows it.

She persisted. “Would you try something with me, Carly? Can you trust me with your imagination for five minutes?”

Her face seemed kind. She hadn't said anything stupid yet. She might actually care. I nodded “yes.”

“Okay. I want you to close your eyes and picture yourself trapped inside a snow globe. Only this isn't a beautiful snow globe. Your snow globe world is a scary city full of dirt, trash, and violent people around every corner.

In your snow globe world, there are people who seem like they may become friends but then they peel off their faces like masks and laugh at you, mock you, and call you names.

The windows on all the apartments in this world are mirrors. When you look in them, you see only what is wrong with you, all the bad choices you've made, all the fear you feel, all the mistakes you've made.

There's no snow in this globe, only a cold, driving rain. You bang on the glass hard but it won't break. You scream as loud as you can but you think no one outside can hear. Can you picture that, Carly?"

I'm crying but I nod "yes" again.

"But someone does hear you. He chooses your snow globe and he finds a way in. He becomes part of this ugly, scary, horrifying world you inhabit and he finds you. The people in the apartments laugh at him and mock him, too. The men beat him up and kill him. Are you with me?"

Nod.

"Then, just as you are thinking it's all lost, he moves. He's alive and now he's more than alive. He takes a bullet from his own chest, the one they used to kill him and he hurls it at the glass of the globe.

The globe shatters and you are free. Suddenly, you're standing with Him in the perfect world of color and light and truth and the snow is falling around you both – pure and white. Are you there, Carly?"

I manage to whisper. "Yes."

"That is God's love for you, dear one. That is God's love. That is Christmas."

Jesus broke through every barrier to be WITH us. He can break through whatever barrier isolates you from experiencing His love.

Have you ever felt alone, separate, left out, forgotten during this holiday season? Do you feel that way now? What's in your snow globe this season?

Remember: Jesus broke through every barrier to be WITH us. He can break through whatever barrier isolates you from experiencing His love.

Read: Luke 2

Pray: Pray for teens and young adults who feel that God's love is not intended for them. Ask God to break through every barrier in your own heart and mind to reach you with a powerful experience of His love during this Advent season.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 15: Manger Danger

Jesus would have stood out in his generation
for a sad reason.

He would have been in a minority of young men his age
because Herod tried to exterminate Him shortly after Jesus' birth
by ordering the execution of all males two and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

A slaughter.

A bloodbath.

The deaths of the innocents
by a king worried that another threatened his throne.

Matthew 2 records the tragic subplot of the Christmas narrative this way: "Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." Matthew 2:16-28 (ESV)

She refused to be comforted because they are no more.

God sent His Son into a brutal world. A serrated edge sojourn in a hair-trigger land. That is the place where we still live.

In December 2012, the lives of twenty children and six adults ended in Newtown, CT,
gunned down in their innocence,
evidence that there is still a prince of this world
worried that another is coming for his throne.

Oh, He's coming, all right.

And when He comes, all things will be set right.

There will be no more weeping
or mourning.

The only bloodbath will be the one prepared for those who thought that babies were fair play in
this war

and that swords and automatic weapons ruled the day.

There is a day coming when love and peace will be the only law.

I wonder if Mary told her son about the slaughter surrounding His birth.

How did they process that?

How many mothers wept?

How many fathers grieved?

How many little girls grew up wondering why they were so many
among so few

because of the loss of the innocents?

Jesus was acquainted with sorrow from birth

and carried the burden of knowing that unnumbered children lost their lives

as His was protected, guided, and celebrated.

The holidays are a complex emotional concoction of joy, nostalgia, hope, and sadness –
especially when we've lost one we love.

Jesus knows.

Jesus knows.

Jesus knows.

In your sorrow, your sadness, or your grief, know that you celebrate Him and honor Him, too, in
that.

For He was a man of sorrows.

He holds your heart in His calloused, gentle hands.

Remember: Oh, He's coming, all right. And when He comes, all things will be set right.

Read: Isaiah 53, Matthew 2

Pray: Pray for those who mourn during this season. Pray that those who take the lives of others will encounter Jesus and be transformed.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 16: Breath of Heaven

I don't know about you but I'm out of breath.

Gasping my way into the holidays and straggling across the finish line into the New Year, I find myself in need of oxygen – a pure, unadulterated, unpolluted breath of heaven.

Sometimes I feel like the wheelbarrow in the poem by William Carlos Williams “So much depends upon a red wheel barrow . . .” I can get so caught up in the battle that sometimes my red cape gets wrapped around my neck and I forget that it takes air to keep me flying this high until I'm plummeting toward Metropolis. So busy saving the world, I forget that someone already did that.

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:17 (ESV)

In Jesus, all things hold together. Not in my name. Not in yours.

I am not the little boy with my finger in the dike holding back the surge that strains against the barrier. I am just a woman who follows God imperfectly in a fallen world. I'm one of those Christians who needs Jesus. How about you?

So today, I'm switching off the news, the Internet, the radio, and the telephone. Today I'm going to rest in what I know to be true. In Him, all things hold together.

In the clamor of the season, I will listen to that whisper that says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” Isaiah 9: 6-7 (ESV)

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Not my zeal. Not your zeal. It's on Him. His capable shoulders. Thank God, it is.

Today I'm going to reflect on the plan of God that centers on Jesus Christ – the unchangeable plan that no one will thwart. I'm going to reflect on His Word, His Word made flesh who dwelt among us, and fill my lungs with the pure air that is breathed before the throne of God.

Who knows what lies ahead in the New Year but before it arrives, I need a minute. So, I'm taking one. You should, too. We're going to need it, loved ones.

Remember: The government will be on HIS shoulders – not yours.

Read: Isaiah 42, Isaiah 9, Colossians 1

Pray: Praise God today for His power, His strength, and His sovereignty over your life and over the world.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 17: Not What We Expected

It was Christmas.

Rob and I had been planning our wedding for weeks, so the decision had been made, but still, I had no ring. Under the tree, there was a gift the size and shape of a ring box. No surprise there, really.

But when he presented it on Christmas morning with all the anticipated “ta-da!” it wasn’t what I expected. Oh, it was a ring, but it wasn’t an engagement ring. It was an amethyst and it was lovely but it wasn’t what I expected.

So it left me grateful but confused. Off- kilter. Thrown for a loop.

The Messiah, too, had long been expected and the buildup was like that of an anticipated superhero. He would come, and He would deliver them from all oppression. He would lead them into glory.

When that kind of press precedes a person, a certain expectation is built. People get a picture in their heads and that’s what they look for.

Not a baby.

A baby isn’t a deliverer. A baby doesn’t save people. When trouble comes, no one says, “Quick! Maybe the baby can get us out of this!”

It was clear from Isaiah that someone powerful was coming:

“For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.”

And God was clear the package that would arrive:

“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 9:5-6

But certainly that was symbolic, right? There’s no way He’d send an actual baby, right?

God created us to appreciate the unexpected, to be delighted by surprise, to revel in a solid plot twist, and He doesn't disappoint. He does catch us off guard, though, and leave us bewildered for a time with His ways.

Fortunately, His baffling plot-twists always lead to a significant payoff in the end. Like Jesus.

So if life is twisting for you now, know that you can trust Him with the unexpected.

Remember: God created us to appreciate the unexpected, to be delighted by surprise, to revel in a solid plot twist. He doesn't disappoint.

Read: Isaiah 9

Pray: If you are facing one of His unexpected plot twists in your life, or know someone who is, ask the Lord to use this moment to increase your faith in Him.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 18: The First Bah Humbug

Some people find the holiday season irritating, aggravating, and downright loathsome.

In Christmas movies, these individuals end up embracing the joy of the season. The special touch of a loved one, a meaningful gift, or a carol sung by a pure-hearted child transforms them and voila!, a happy, holiday ending.

In real life, they maintain their Grinch-like posture, embrace their inner Scrooge, and Hoover the joy of the season from those around them, as well. This, loved ones, is as traditional as a crèche.

The first “Bah humbug!” was muttered long ago in a language still spoken by descendants of the original Christmas hater. You see, not everyone greets the coming of a new king with open arms. Especially not the current king sitting precariously on the throne just waiting for a usurper to upstage him.

When wise men traveled from the east in search of the new king predicted by the arrangement of the constellations, they thoughtfully checked in with the sitting king of the land, King Herod. Naively thinking he would share their joy and wonder, they informed him that a new king had been born and they had traveled far to worship at his feet.

Herod, deft at deception and political prowess, played along with the magi, pretending to agree with their delight at the newcomer who threatened his throne. “Please, do let me know when you find him!” Herod asks them, his voice a caramel river of charm. “I will follow to where you are and adore the young lad myself. I have something special I would like him to have.”

Yeah, like a knife to the chest.

The magi, being wise men, did smarten up after they found Jesus. They kept mum about the precise address of his crib and headed home by an alternate route they worked out on an ancient version of MapQuest. The frustrated king, reigning in a time long before GPS, felt he had no other choice, but to order a mass extermination of all male children under the age of two.

This is not a heartwarming story. This is chubby baby boys warm and swaddled at their mothers’ breasts one moment – sliced in two by the glinting edges of Roman swords and daggers the next. Mothers and fathers left reeling and confused, kneeling and weeping in the cobbled streets of Jerusalem, without recourse under the reign of a merciless tyrant worried that an infant might steal his glory.

King Herod was an early adopter of the “Bah Humbug!” approach to Christmas but he was not the originator. We must travel further back in time to locate that old snake. There was once a created being who thought he could be God. He was ambitious for the throne. He was wise, clever, beautiful, and talented but he aspired to a height that belongs to only One.

When God cast him from heaven for his rebellion, along with those who supported him, Satan raged against the machine. When God created a new race, humanity, he immediately plotted to spoil them and seat himself on the throne of their hearts. He gloried in himself when his original deception worked and God cast them from paradise.

Imagine his anger, then, when God set into motion a plan to redeem humanity!

There is no plan for his redemption. He stands condemned. But now, this puny race, this people so easily deceived and infected with the blood of rebellion, now these humans are to be redeemed with the perfect blood of the Only Son of God!

When this realization set in, loved ones, the original “Bah Humbug!” echoed through the cosmos as Satan spit, cursed, and railed against the audacity of grace bestowed upon undeserving humans.

To this day, there are those who would rather sit upon the throne of their own measly lives and reign in the moment, than to allow this true king to take His seat and rule in their lives forever.

One day, we will hear the last “Bah humbug!” It will not be a cry of triumph but a pitiful gasp as the originator finally answers for the spilled blood of those babies and the babies who came after them whose innocence was rent in two by men who were neither wise nor seeking anything other than their own glory.

He sees the precious, inestimable value of redemption bestowed through faith in Jesus Christ – why don’t we? His anger burns against God for bestowing such a gift and against those of us who have received it.

King Herod lives on and his heart will not melt at the pure song of a child. Evil lives in this world and it will have its way in many dark places – even on Christmas day. But it will not have its way forever, loved ones.

Remember: To this day, there are those who would rather sit upon the throne of their own measly lives and reign in the moment, than to allow this true king to take His seat and rule in their lives forever.

Read: Isaiah 14: 12-15, Matthew 2

Pray: Intercede for children who live in homes where the holidays bring stress, abuse, and danger rather than peace and joy.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 19: Buried Treasure

Buried treasure. Isn't it compelling? The thought that a person could stumble on some priceless, ancient artifact or a chest of pirate's gold stirs something restless within us.

We never outgrow stories of adventurers who leave the comforts of home, braving dangers, enduring hardships, ignoring scoffers, taking unimaginable risks to seek the prize. Adventurers reaping rewards - hidden and unreachable to any unwilling to follow the same path.

Why?

Some say it's our inherited bent toward sin – the drive to reap what we didn't earn, the burning greed of the big win, the selfish drive to claim what isn't ours. That could be it. But, I have another theory.

Before we fell from grace, we were the glorious cap of creation, made in our Father's image. I think that knowing what trials lay before us, our wise God hardwired into our design this love of buried treasure. He knew that no matter how far we wandered from our home in Him, He could activate this embedded homing device planted in a safe place in our hearts. He could awaken within us a distant memory of our life with Him and it would inspire us to set our feet on the path of adventure.

He knew that we few, the treasure hunters of each age, would brave every danger, risk every comfort, and overcome every obstacle to regain the golden kingdom that once was our birthright, stolen from us by the evil one when he conspired with our grandparents, Adam and Eve, to destroy what God had designed in us.

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Matthew 13:44

Like the very best treasure, the kingdom of heaven is not in an easy place to reach. The path leads through dark places, hardship, suffering, loss, self-denial, and death of all the dreams our ancestors told us were good. We sometimes believe the search will kill us. In fact, we will die to ourselves. But we are secured to our bely partner, Jesus, by the powerful, scarlet rope of His shed blood and so we can scale the heights or plumb the depths knowing we travel safe.

Ask any believer who has suffered or endured great hardships and they will tell you that in their darkest hour, Jesus was there. To suffer and to endure is to find the priceless treasure of knowing that there is no place we can go that Jesus won't travel with us. It is to learn the way to that treasure so we can guide others.

If you face this Advent season with a cup overflowing with troubles. If Hallmark commercials make you weep for all that is lacking in your life. If physical pain or fresh loss, financial hardship or disease, devastating or disappointing relationships are the soundtrack for your season, take heart. This was the path of Jesus when He came to be our Emmanuel, God with us.

To know Jesus means to follow Him down these sorrowful roads even when the rest of the planet is shopping for diamonds and toasting each other's health and success. But it is also to find the buried treasure of the kingdom of God.

X marks the spot. Kind of like the legs of a manger, or the stripes of a whip on human flesh, or the beams of a cross. Think about it, fellow adventurer, and press on.

Remember: To know Jesus means to follow Him down these sorrowful roads even when the rest of the planet is shopping for diamonds and toasting each other's health and success. But it is also to find the buried treasure of the kingdom of God.

Read: Matthew 13, Isaiah 53

Pray: Ask God for the strength to continue to seek Him even when the way is hard and few are willing to travel with you. Intercede for those who seek only earthly treasure and miss the true riches of the season.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 20: God of the Third Shift

He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good so be good for goodness' sake.

How creepy is that, right? Sounds more like a futuristic novel or a mystery about a stalker than a Christmas song for children. The idea that someone sees everything we do can be unsettling. That's why someone invented Santa. Back when moms routinely had large families, one of them must have come up with Santa in order to keep little ones in line when she was out of the room.

But, what can be a sobering thought for mischievous little ones or troublesome teens, can be an enormous encouragement to those who labor well at tasks that no one else sees. No one human, that is. Because God never slumbers nor sleeps and He is ever watchful even over those of us who feel invisible.

There are men and women around the world doing mighty, heroic, compassionate, sacrificial things but no one knows. These are the third shift faithful.

There are spouses holding and calming disoriented husbands or wives who awake with panic because of Alzheimer's or who wrestle with pain from chronic illnesses.

There are moms praying late into the night over sleeping children, straying children, or sick children – battling for them on a celestial plane, bathed in the glow of night-lights, listening to hospital monitors, or watching for headlights in the driveway.

There are caregivers and first responders in a myriad of circumstances administering comfort, aid, rescue, consolation, and true joy while everyone around sleeps. There are young people standing behind registers and counters working hard, providing fine service, even when no one is looking.

There are dads working second and third jobs or crunching numbers to keep food on the table. Soldiers who aren't even old enough to drink, faithfully standing watch in lands far from home, wondering if anyone is thinking of them.

This is why I love shepherds.

Shepherds were not the rock stars of their day that the Christmas story makes them out to be. Until that band of angels showed up, shepherds were the invisible people of their day. They were clinging to the bottom rung of society. People probably told shepherd jokes at the inns.

Shepherds smelled bad. They spent hours alone and weren't treasured too dearly by their own families who often chose the child with little potential for other tasks to go out to tend the flocks at night.

Their acts of heroism – helping ewes through difficult births, defending the flock from hungry lions or wolves, and rescuing lost sheep, often went unnoticed, unappreciated. Their poetry and songs were performed for an audience of One. Their faithfulness was taken for granted by everyone but the One who sees all. And the joys they experienced – new lambs, light shows in the sky, or triumphing over danger – they rejoiced in these things alone, too.

But God sent a message to all invisible people who keep watch in the night when He chose to announce the birth of His Son to shepherds. Think about it.

He's God. His son could have been born anywhere at any time. Certainly, there were more important people who could have heard the news first. Babies are born in the daylight all the time. I think God wanted everyone who labors faithfully but invisibly to know – He sees.

He knows all those times you choose to do the right thing when no one is looking. He shares your joy and He knows your sorrow. Even if no one else knows, He sees that you are a hero.

One day, everyone will know because He sees. No one ever sang songs about shepherds until Jesus arrived on the scene. Well, not nice songs. In heaven, they are writing songs about you, faithful ones.

So don't lose heart in the late watches of the night. You are never alone. You are never unnoticed. God does not take your acts of love for granted. To all who tend and care and watch through the night, rejoice! The God of the Universe sees and One day He will tell us your story.

Until then, lift a mug of coffee to the shepherds who went before you and thank God for sending Jesus who faithfully shepherds us through the watches of our long night.

Remember: He knows all those times you choose to do the right thing when no one is looking.

Read: Psalm 23

Pray: Pray for all the invisible people serving others in the late night hours that they will be comforted by the presence of God and know He is with them.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 21: Mary Did You Know

God is clear that fear is a choice.

This is a tough lesson for me because I've been shaking in my booties since birth. Have you noticed God tells us not to be afraid at the oddest times?

When the angel appeared to Mary, he told her not to be afraid. Huge props to Mary for obeying because God was about to visit upon her a high calling, but one marked with suffering, rejection at the hands of her own people, and the agony of watching her innocent son murdered before her very eyes.

And still, God tells her to choose not to be afraid.

In speaking to the prophet Isaiah, in the passages foretelling the coming of Jesus, God says this:

“For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.” Isaiah 8:11-15 (ESV)

Do not fear what this people fear nor be in dread. These are words for us today. We live in fearful times. People are afraid of losing power, of suffering, of being unsuccessful, of looking bad to others, of being considered ugly or weak. Watch carefully the commercials on TV this season and see what the marketers are encouraging you to fear. Then, choose not to fear what these people fear.

God makes clear that we can choose to direct our fear.

I'm terrified of diving and fearful around water but if one of my children fell into a river, I would direct my fear to my greater fear of losing my child and so, would overcome my fear of the water.

In the same way, it's natural for us to fear suffering, hardship, disapproval from others, and sacrifice but when we direct our fear to our greater fear – fear of dishonoring or disobeying the Lord – we are free to overcome our fear and swim against the current of the age.

Mary knew what it was like to swim against that current.

She spent her entire life for Christ and she suffered on His behalf for our salvation and for God's glory.

Do not fear what the world fears.

What lesser fears are you allowing to hold you back from entering God's greater story? 'Tis the season to release them and inhabit His call on your life.

Remember: Do not fear what this people fear nor be in dread.

Read: Luke 1

Pray: Confess your fears to the Lord and ask Him to replace your fears with love and faith.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 22: Now that I Have Held Him

In churches around the world today, some people worshiped.

Other people simply attended service.

Some people connected with the living God.

Others only managed to connect their seats to a pew.

It's as it has been since Jesus was born.

Some who met Him saw just a man;

while others worshiped because they knew they'd seen the living God.

What makes the difference? It's in the seeking.

If I am seeking to have my own needs met, to please others, or to fulfill a religious duty, I could be standing next to my own salvation and not know it.

If I am seeking Jesus, I could be on a bloody battlefield and encounter the living God, worshiping with my whole being even as bombs landed only feet away.

One old man showed us this truth.

Simeon had been waiting for Jesus His whole life. Seeking God into his advanced years, attuned to the Holy Spirit, he was in the temple when a young couple brought a baby to present him to the Lord.

The couple walked through crowds of people and most only saw a poor couple with a poor man's offering for a poor child. Simeon saw the long-awaited hope of the world, Emmanuel, God with us.

“And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been

revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Luke 2: 22-35 (ESV)

That’s what it looks like to worship.

If we seek Him, we will find Him and it will satisfy our souls in such a way that we will feel that we can pass from this life to the next because in meeting Him, we have already begun our journey home.

Remember: If I am seeking to have my own needs met, to please others, or to fulfill a religious duty, I could be standing next to my own salvation and not know it.

Read: Luke 2

Pray: Ask the Lord to open your eyes to where He is all around you today and to inspire you to seek only Him.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 23: Disturbing the Peace at Christmas

Jesus didn't come to bring peace on earth. Jesus came to disturb the peace.

Why? Because any peace to be had apart from relationship with and obedience to God is peace that is built on a lie. Peace that crumbles. Peace that's a mask, a façade, a veneer, a sham.

Jesus came to be the Way, our path to the Father, to wholeness, to redemption, to reconciliation with God, to perfect freedom, and to the peace that is eternal. To do that, He must offend the current rulers of the age.

When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple, Simeon spoke this prophecy over Him:

“Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Luke 2:34-35 (ESV)

Here's the thing: if we're following Jesus, we must also be disturbers of the peace.

We must represent Jesus and when we do, it will reveal the thoughts of many hearts – and that won't be pretty. A sword will pierce our own souls, too. And sometimes our flesh, or the flesh of our children.

As Americans debate the Christmas wars, the culture wars, and other skirmishes in the battle for souls on earth, Christians around the world suffer hardship, imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, forced marriage, and death in the name of Jesus.

As we prepare for Christmas, let us honor Jesus by engaging in prayerful battle for those who suffer for His name around the world.

One day, this will end, but not before it becomes more intense. Not before it reaches our own doorsteps.

When the war for souls is over and we sit around our Father's table sharing stories of what we did in the Great War, we will sit across from these dear ones, these brothers and sisters who were imprisoned, beaten, raped, and killed.

Will part of your story be that you moved spiritual forces on their behalf in prayer and raised your voice to all who would listen for those whose voices are being silenced?

In honor of their lives, will you sacrifice one hour of Christmas preparation to pray for those who suffer in Jesus' name?

Step out in faith and watch God work. Follow in Jesus' footsteps. Disturb the peace.

Remember: One day, this will end, but not before it becomes more intense. Not before it reaches our own doorsteps.

Read: Matthew 10:16-42

Pray: Intercede today for those who suffer for Jesus' name around the world.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 24: How to Be Indestructible

Have you ever been separated from the things that once defined you?

Maybe it was your career, your marriage, your appearance, or an ability you had but lost. How lost did you feel? How hard was it to meet new people and to answer the most basic questions like where do you live, or what do you do, or are you married?

There really is no way to understand the naked exposure of losing that something that defines you until it happens. Then, even though you know in your mind that others have gone through it, still, you feel alone.

Once, there was a night janitor where I work.

He was a hard worker but pleasant, too. His English wasn't fluent but we had brief, friendly chats. One night, he said to me, "You are so kind to me. I want you to know that in my own country, I used to be somebody."

I used to be somebody. I understood what he was saying. Here in America, he works three, sometimes four jobs. He wears coveralls and comes on the job as everyone else leaves. He mops floors, cleans toilets, and takes orders from a young man who could have been his grandson. People seldom speak to him except to point out a spot that he missed or to ask him if he'd mistakenly taken a member's missing cell phone. Three times they ask him, "just in case."

In his country, he was a professor at a university, head of the department. He taught Psychology. He enjoyed his subject, his research, and his students but there were limitations on his life and certain dangers. In this country, he is no one; but in his country, his children don't live in fear.

Sometimes, there are compelling reasons to leave what defines us behind.

Usually, it's not a venture we take on willingly. There's a trigger, an inciting incident, a personal tsunami that rolls in. When it rolls out, we're stripped of that which used to hide the naked truth of our unadorned selves.

Now, here we stand. Just a person. Without credentials or references or photo id's. We simply are.

It doesn't feel like enough.

Especially when others are dressed so well in their degrees and designations, their designer clothes and deeds of ownership, their pedigrees, histories, accomplishments, and their entourage

ready to offer testimonials on their behalf. We think about how, in our old country, we used to be somebody. How, now, we're not.

Most of us only enter this condition when compelled by forces beyond our control. No one volunteers to be a refugee. Except Jesus.

Jesus willingly stripped off all that would identify Him as God, as Creator of the Universe, as THE WORD, and became a nobody, just a baby born to some poor couple on a busy night in the city. When He stepped into our story, He came as no one, revealing His true self only to those who took the time to take a second look.

The apostle John wrote one of the saddest passages of scripture in this: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." John 1:9-11 (ESV)

Have you ever experienced that? Rejection by those who used to call you their own? Refusal by those once close to you to acknowledge you. Have you ever become nobody in front of everyone who once thought you were somebody?

Jesus did.

Like the night janitor, He had a compelling reason for leaving everything that outwardly defined Him and outwardly become nothing – His love for and obedience to His Father who loved us so dearly, He sent His only son. He, too, wanted His children to live free from fear.

He showed us that becoming nothing is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Giving up our identity, leaving our home, descending from the heights, this is nothing to fear.

Separation from the Father's love – that is a fearful condition. Because Jesus came, we never need to fear that again, if we receive Him. To find our identity in the measures of this world is natural. To find our identity in our relationship with Jesus Christ is to touch our eternal selves and to know the freedom of living indestructible lives.

Remember: Becoming nothing is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Separation from the Father's love – that is a fearful condition.

Read: Hebrews 7:14-16, Hebrews 2:9, John 1

Pray: Pray for encouragement for those who have set aside earthly things to better represent Jesus to those around them.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 25: Lenny Thomas Had Seen It All

Lenny Thomas had seen it all.

He'd been a big-rig trucker for thirty-five years and nothing surprised him anymore. He'd crossed the country more times than he could remember and run across every character you could imagine and some you couldn't.

As he pulled up behind the break down on I-95 just outside of Bethlehem, PA he was not anticipating anything more than offering a lift to a stranded stranger.

The owner of the aging pick-up towing a horse trailer seemed like a regular Joe. "Thanks for stopping, Mister. I could really use your help."

"Truck's seen better days." Lenny brushed snowflakes off his canvas coat. "Need a lift?"

"No, sir. It's my wife." He led Lenny to the horse trailer and shone his flashlight in on a young woman in obvious labor. "We've got no place to go, no insurance. Her time's arrived right here, right now. I - I've never done this. I called 911 but that was 20 minutes ago. I think the baby's coming now."

The young woman screamed and Lenny figured he'd better grab a blanket from the truck. Ten minutes later, after much sweating and more blood than he usually cared to encounter, Lenny held in his rough mitts a squawking, squirming baby boy.

As the young father tended to his wife, Lenny wrapped the baby in an old flannel blanket and stared at the new life. The boy's hand curled around his finger and Lenny felt something he hadn't felt in years. Awe.

The horse trailer rocked as another rig sped by, too close for comfort, and suddenly the world seemed a most dangerous, dirty, terrifying place for one so small and so pure. Lenny didn't even know this child but he cradled him close to his chest and silently prayed for his protection, his health, and his future.

Tears rolled down the old trucker's cheeks, as, for the first time in years, he was awestruck that the God of all creation had chosen to send His son in such a vulnerable package to such a sinful world.

Lenny didn't even know this infant's name and already he'd protect him with his own life. The full-impact of the Father's sacrifice for the sinners inhabiting this planet struck Lenny like a meteor in the desert.

"Sir, I'll take him now." The boy's father reached out and Lenny reluctantly placed the little package in his arms. "Thank you for all your help."

Lenny stood by the side of the road for a long time scanning the starry sky – half expecting to see a choir of angels.

Another rig pulled up behind his and the driver shouted to him above the engine noise, "You need assistance?"

"Nope, I'm good."

"All right, Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" Lenny shouted, meaning it for the first time in years.

The Pennsylvania State police received a dozen calls that night reporting a crazy truck driver dancing by the side of the highway, waving at passers-by and lying on the embankment making snow angels.

Reclaim your sense of wonder and awe! God can do that for you if you've lost it. Ask Him and see what happens. He makes all things new.

Remember: Reclaim your sense of wonder and awe! God can do that for you if you've lost it.

Read: Luke 2:1-21, John 3:16

Pray: For yourself and for those around you to have a renewed sense of awe as you consider the gift of Jesus Christ.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 26: Alone at Christmas

“I’ll be fine. I promise.” Arlene smiled into the phone as she switched off the porch light and locked the door.

Her oldest daughter could not resist calling from the car as they pulled away, headed to the airport. “You won’t be lonely?”

“Enjoy your trip, already! You and Mark deserve this vacation. Go!”

As she hung up, she took a moment to look over the photos of her family on the sideboard. Children, all grown. Grandchildren, nearly grown. Her David, gone on ahead of her to glory after fifty years together. She was so very blessed.

Time to get ready for her company. She hummed quietly as she put on water for tea. *O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining.*

She’d been planning this Christmas celebration for weeks. As each call came in, from children and grandchildren, with apologies and alternate Christmas plans, she’d been sad, at first. How could it possibly happen that she’d be alone on Christmas? Still, there it was.

Sophie was just getting back on her feet after the chemo and Arlene had spent several weeks living with her on the West Coast to help out. Her youngest daughter would have her brood around her at her own home for the holidays and Arlene couldn’t be happier for that!

This year Tom and Shannon were due at Shannon’s parents for Christmas. They’d been kind enough to give up their turn last year since it had been her first Christmas without David and everyone had wanted to support her.

Then, Mark surprised Nora with a long-awaited trip to Greece as a combination Christmas/anniversary/thank-you-for-taking-me back gift. Arlene was so thrilled they had reconciled, she could hardly complain.

She’d had a long conversation with Micah over Skype yesterday. How fortunate that missionary families now had the blessing of computer technology to keep in touch! However, now she was really alone.

Oh, she’d entertained offers from friends at church but then it occurred to her that she had the opportunity to enjoy what she’d always wanted through years of raising her family and caring for others. Politely, she’d declined all invitations for the chance to spend a quiet Christmas with her dearest friend.

Now, here she was. The fireplace snapped brilliantly. Crisco curled up in his basket on the floor by her chair. Her favorite orange tea scented the air. The Christmas candles in the windows proclaimed the season to the world, but all that mattered to her was right here.

Arlene tucked her prayer blanket around her legs and checked the small stack of books on the table beside her: prayer journal, hymnal, her favorite devotional, and her Bible, frayed, worn, and familiar. She snuggled into her chair and took several deep breaths followed by a sip of tea. Then she closed her eyes.

“Here I am, Jesus. We have all night tonight and all day tomorrow. Let’s celebrate Christmas with uninterrupted worship and conversation, just us, my dearest friend, just us.”

Remember: Jesus is with us always.

Read: Matthew 28:20b

Pray: For all who spend Christmas alone, that they will sense the presence of Jesus with them.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 27: Don't Treat Jesus Like a Baby

You know how sometimes when you go home at Christmas,
your family treats you like you're still a kid
even though you're twenty-three?
or forty-two?

Sometimes, especially at Christmas, we treat Jesus
as if He was still a baby.

He's not.

The babe in a manger grew up,
took the sins of all humanity upon His shoulders,
descended to the depths of hell,
and rose triumphant over death.

God is now unswaddled.

He's coming again

and when He does

He'll be riding a white horse and

He'll be armed.

Jesus isn't afraid of anything in your world.

He's not afraid of the cruel words exchanged in your bedroom moments before the dinner guests arrive. He's not put off by your son's addiction. He's not appalled that your daughter sent nude pictures of herself to a boy who then pasted them to Facebook. He won't cringe when your father-in-law curses or your brother arrives with his new boyfriend or when Aunt Hildy passes out from mixing pills with wine.

He still wants to come to dinner. He's like that. He died to invite you to His table.

In a world of shooters and sex trafficking, poverty and politics, He walks unafraid, knocking on doors, asking to come in and dine with sinners.

Now, I do think He's angry with churches who send money and shoeboxes overseas but won't dirty their pews with the locals who don't clean up so well on Sunday mornings.

I do think He'll have a word or two, served up on the edge of a sword, for clergy who would never swear or get a tattoo but who exploit little children as they say they represent God.

I do believe that the posers and pretenders of the faith, those wearing sheepskin over their primal, hunting souls, those who praise Him with their mouths but curse Him with their lives, I do believe this population has something to worry about when He shows up for dinner.

But not you, loved one. He's eager to come to your table. He's not a baby who needs to be protected from your family situation

or you.

He's ready to step out of the wooden crèche on the mantle and eat at the grown-up table right beside you,

loving you,

loving those you love,

even the challenging ones you don't know how to love -

even if you're the challenging one.

He knows.

Invite Him to Christmas dinner, and don't be surprised if He stays.

Remember: Sometimes, especially at Christmas, we treat Jesus as if He was still a baby. He's not.

Read: Revelation 19:11-16, Mark 2:13-17

Pray: Invite Jesus in to every moment of your life – even the ones you wish no one else would witness. He'll stand beside you, unafraid, and transform your perspective and your soul.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 28: Disappointed in Christmas

Holiday movies generally involve a crazy cast of characters aiming for a perfect Christmas but facing mounting conflict in that pursuit.

Through a series of zany escapades and a healthy dose of miracles provided by the nebulous “spirit of Christmas” they all wind up with the perfect Christmas moment where everything falls into place, all family faults are forgiven as endearing quirks, and life appears to bear at least the promise of a happily ever after.

That’s Hollywood’s version of Christmas, which has gotten all confused with a celebration of the birth of Christ. Fed a steady diet of these films with a side salad of department store music, TV commercials, and Christmas newsletters, many of us are built up through December for a great crescendo of disappointment when we greet the bracing reality of our Christmas day.

The first Christmas had little to do with human perfection.

The Israelites lived under the oppression of Roman rule and were becoming embittered and angry. We have a window into the sort of mayhem this oppression brought into the lives of the Jews as we see Joseph and Mary forced to travel, her great with child, to an overcrowded Bethlehem. Everyone was so busy with the commotion that no one could be troubled to make room for a young couple welcoming their first child.

The Romans taxed the people without mercy, utilizing Jewish tax collectors who often exacted more than what was required in order to line their own pockets. Joseph was a carpenter and probably worked hard but when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice for him, they presented a pair of doves (or two young pigeons). This was the offering of poor parents for a child born into family of modest means. God chose to send His only son to an oppressed, embittered people into a home that couldn’t afford a lamb for the sacrifice on his behalf.

Human life was of so little value at that time that King Herod, threatened by the news that a new king had been born, ordered all the babies in Bethlehem, two years and younger, to be slaughtered. So for years to come, the anniversary of Jesus’ birth was a time of weeping and grieving for those whose infants were torn from their arms and put to the sword.

Not so perfect, the actual history of what we are remembering this week.

The movies say “Christmas is about family” but the first family was separated from theirs. The movies say, “Christmas is for children” but the smallest ones suffered at the first anniversaries of

Jesus' birth. The movies say, "Christmas is for romance" but there's not much romance to be had in a cold stable. The movies say, "Christmas is about sharing and having enough" but there was no sharing of warmth and shelter for the baby Jesus and there were many who didn't have enough.

Still, we drive ourselves to distraction to set the perfect table beside the perfect tree to be shared for the perfect time with a perfect family to honor the birth of One whose coming was made necessary by our inability to achieve perfection on our own.

Get it?

We do long for perfection but it's a longing God placed in our hearts to drive us to Himself. The birth of Jesus is His way of saying – you're not ever going to become perfect through your own efforts – I know that and I love you anyway.

The story of Jesus' birth is a big imperfect mess except for the One at the center of it all. Hebrews says that Jesus is "the author and perfecter of our faith." He is the perfecter – not us – Him.

When things around you are imperfect this Christmas, smile and nod and say "Yes!" I get it. I agree. We need you. I am so glad You love us anyway. I am imperfect. Those I love are imperfect. I've tried, but I cannot make things perfect. You are the One who makes things perfect. I am so glad You came.

Remember: We do long for perfection but it's a longing God placed in our hearts to drive us to Himself.

Read: Isaiah 61:1-2a, Romans 8

Pray: Ask God to free you to love Him imperfectly and to rejoice in His perfect love for you.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 29: Alone in a Crowd

Have you ever felt alone in a crowd?

Have you ever sat in a room full of people and felt saturated with loneliness?

When my children were young, they occasionally encountered a weekend when no friends were available for plans. They'd complain that they hated time alone. My counsel was always the same: There is a lot of life ahead. For some of it, we'll be with others, but for much of it, we are unavoidably alone. It's crucial to learn how to be alone.

Aloneness strikes for many reasons. It's even possible to be alone lying right next to someone, just as it's possible to be alone and not feel lonely. Mary had a moment of profound aloneness on the night Jesus was born.

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.**” Luke 2:15-19

Better than anyone in the room, Mary knew this child was from God. He was, in fact, the Messiah, and her life was now bound with His, whatever it would hold. The mother of God. A singular calling on a young life that altered any plans she had for herself. There was a loneliness about it that only the Holy Spirit could invade.

Joseph probably felt alone, too. When he learned in a dream that King Herod sought the life of his young son and they had to escape to Egypt, he probably felt very alone. He didn't plan this life. Fleeing his homeland with a young family to live in hiding. Always watching their backs. What did the rest of his family think about his sojourn in Egypt? Again, he experienced loneliness only God could penetrate.

There are times when those of us blessed with the fullest lives feel alone. This is why, I tell my children, we need a day-by-day, moment-by-moment, relationship with Jesus Christ. He is there when no one else is – or can be. He will never leave us nor forsake us. He is God WITH us. Emmanuel.

Maybe you have a full house or perhaps you live completely apart. No matter your circumstances, you need to avail yourself of the presence of Jesus – the only One who can walk with us through every one of life's valleys.

Intrinsic in our design is that we are never completely fulfilled through relationships with other humans. That remnant of longing that remains, even when we are as close to another human as possible, is the reminder that God loves us and longs for relationship with us.

He came to be God WITH us. Emmanuel. Celebrate by being WITH Him today.

Remember: That remnant of longing that remains, even when we are as close to another human as possible, is the reminder that God loves us and longs for relationship with us.

Read: Colossians 1:15-23

Pray: Praise God for His desire to be present with you.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 30: I am a Man with No Boots

A man sees another man outside in the cold with no shoes.

He buys the man a pair of boots.

Someone witnesses this act of kindness

then everything gets a little strange.

When the media got a hold of this story, this simple act of kindness, it became something else. They researched the homeless man. Was he deserving? Was he truly poor? Was the man who gave him the boots a saint or a chump? The homeless man decided he should be compensated for the media storm around the story. After all, if he hadn't been homeless and needy, there'd be no hero, no story, right? We can make a mess of anything, can't we?

As I followed this story one December, I realized how much I am like the man with no boots.

Jesus came and saw me sitting in a mess - needy, homeless, lost, and cold. Others saw the mess, too, but He saw everything. He saw beyond what showed on the surface. Yet still, He gave me this gift in front of everyone.

A pair of boots, called grace.

It was big news. People paid Jesus a lot of attention for His selfless act. I was jealous and felt that if I was part of a story that was such big news, I should receive some of the glory.

Twisted, right?

My obvious unworthiness of such kindness, made others dig a little into the story. They discovered other evidence of my unworthiness, including the fact that I was largely responsible for my own situation and didn't deserve the boots. When others started talking about it, it all just seemed like a big complicated, confusing mess.

But Jesus wasn't confused.

When He and I had a moment alone I said, "They're right, you know. I don't deserve your gift. I created my own situation. I tried to rob you of some of your glory."

"This is only news to the others," He replied.

I tried to give Him back the boots.

He looked at them in my outstretched hand and said, "**It was never about what you deserved. It was about what you needed and what I wanted to give. I am the Grace-Giver.**"

"What do I do now?" I asked.

"Keep the boots," He said.

"Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But **because of his great love for us**, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." Ephesians 2:4b-9

Are you open to receiving His gift of grace? Live open. While you're busy planning to give, the biggest surprise of the season may be the grace you receive.

Remember: It was never about what you deserved. It was about what you needed and what God wanted to give. He is the Grace-Giver.

Read: Romans 3, Ephesians 2

Pray: Thank God at every opportunity throughout the day for His grace. Ask for opportunities to extend His grace to others.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 31: Eat, Pray, Love, Give Me a Break!

Few movies aggravate me as much as *Eat, Pray, Love*.

I know it's supposed to be about this one woman's romantic and courageous exploration of herself and the world but it just feels to me like one long self-indulgent justification for narcissism. An endless, fruitless searching for a truth that can be found without touching a mystical elephant or sleeping with every stud with an accent.

Okay, I know I just angered some of you – if I did, spend a moment in your meditation cave, renew your balance, eat a plate of pasta, and look up a photo of Javier Bardem. It will pass.

There are flashes of truth in the flick. It's important for a person to be a person and not leech their identity from the one they love. There is more to life than acquiring possessions and achievements. And Americans do have a grave weakness in their inability to experience the daily joys and pleasures of life. We miss so much.

This is why Jesus came. Jesus didn't miss anything while he was here.

His arrival was like a great cosmic pause button inviting us all not to miss the adventure. John, known as the disciple Jesus loved, quotes Jesus as saying this: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; **I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.**” John 10:10

Do you experience the fullness of life?

Jesus didn't come to make pruney followers – sucked dry of the juices and rich flavor of life. He didn't come to restrict our lives but to expand them. Following Jesus should not shut us down from life's pleasures, but open us up to them in ways unavailable to the rest of humanity.

In *Eat, Pray, Love*, a woman travels the world and experiences art, culture, nature, and humanity, but her experiences boil down to “what does it all have to do with me?” I speak from experience when I tell you that Jesus opens up the world to you right where you are and it isn't all about you!

Even if you spend your entire life in one country, one square mile, one neighborhood, one marriage, one wheelchair, one hospital bed, one prison cell, one apartment – even then, the presence of Jesus Christ in your life can explode the parameters of your universe and bring you a fullness beyond what anyone can imagine.

The truth is not out there somewhere. The truth does not need to be sought with a plane ticket, a passport, or a love affair with a buff-bodied foreigner. The truth is that fullness of life is available to you right now, where you are, through the coming of Jesus Christ into your heart.

If you know Him already, stand today and let Him open you up to the fullness of life where you are. Don't be a freeze-dried believer! Let the Living Water fill you and expand you so that life oozes from your pores!

Exhale, in His name! Laugh. Eat. Forgive with abandon. Sleep soundly. Make love to your spouse as if it's the last night on the planet. Say yes to some crazy idea your kids have about staying up late or playing football on the lawn at midnight. Greet the neighbors as if they're long lost relatives. Hug the crabby woman at church you always think is judging you. Tell her she's beautiful. Take a risk. Actually, taste your food. Actually, see your family. Actually, listen for God's voice.

If you don't know Him yet, don't wait. He has been waiting for you, loving you, and willing you to seek Him.

Jesus Christ. Emmanuel. He came that we should have life, and have it to the full. Eat. Pray. Love. Enjoy the season and don't miss the adventure, loved ones. It's here.

God bless us, one and all.

Remember: He came that we should have life, and have it to the full

Read: 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Pray: Tell God you want to be included in His great adventure. Open yourself up to loving Him and others more fully. Receive His love for you today.

A Deeper Experience of Advent

Day 32: How Klingon Christians Face the New Year

No one can be completely prepared for the year to come. It looms before us all.

Some see a cliff, some, a wall. Others plan to ride the wave, while others will sail into calmer waters until the storm passes.

But no one really knows what lies ahead.

Klingon Christians don't need to know. We live to rise to a new challenge. We have studied. We have trained. We know our stuff and we're eager to use it. We trust, not ourselves, but the Spirit of Christ within us.

We believe that while no one can prepare for every sorrow, catastrophe, obstacle, or impediment that will arise, the Spirit of Christ has gone before us, resides within us, and guides us through.

There will certainly also be joys. There will be laughter and good news, sweet fellowship, and victory. These we'll embrace like drowning men cling to driftwood on the high seas. We'll celebrate like men on furlough from hell. We'll suck the marrow of each pleasant day to warm our bones on the dark and frigid nights that will also surely arise.

There will be terrible times. Betrayals like sucker punches. Losses hurled at us like wrecking balls. Rejections, hardships, persecutions, and pain. Because we are Klingon Christians, we'll embrace the horror of these times, too.

We know that Jesus knelt alone in the garden, sweat like great drops of blood pouring from Him, as He pleaded for our Father to find another way. We know He rose from that place, choosing not His own will but our Father's be done.

He embraced the horror that was betrayal and beatings, rejections and the cross, humiliation and death. We know He rose victorious. We know His victory is ours. We know His same spirit is ours. We know life everlasting is ours.

So we will face this year with courage, boldness, and honor. We'll greet it with hearts ready to love, to give, to sacrifice, and to speak light into dark minds. Free to be joyful when the moments call for joy and to weep when they call for sorrow.

We face this year knowing that He has given us everything we need for life and godliness. We believe this even when we look at our bodies, our bank accounts, our prospects, our problems, and our fellows because it is true.

We stand on the edge of the cliff of this New Year and raise our glasses as we commune with the Almighty God who is a Warrior, who is a Strong Tower, who is a Consuming Fire, and who is The Ancient of Days.

This is a good day to rise.

We will rise, loved ones. We, too, will rise. Embrace the New Year, my friends. We will face it together and in our weakness, we will be strong. Because a baby born in a manger grew, lived perfectly, laid down His life, and rose again.

He is the salvation for all who come to Him. Even us Klingons.

Remember: We face this year knowing that He has given us everything we need for life and godliness.

Read: Hebrews 10:35-39, Psalm 37

Pray: Pour out your hearts to the Lord today with all your hopes, fears, dreams, plans, and needs for the year to come. Consecrate the year to Him and face it boldly, knowing He faces it with you.

Dear Readers,

We're reached the end of this devotional but I feel as if we're just beginning to know one another! I'd love to keep our conversation going. I invite you to join me over at my website, www.loriroevelveld.com where you will find links to all the other places I hang out online. If this devotional touched you, consider reading my new book, *Running from a Crazy Man (and other adventures traveling with Jesus)*. You can purchase it on Amazon.

If this Advent devotional has raised any questions or if God has used it in your life in anyway, I'd love to know. Leave me a note on my contact page on the website or message me through Facebook. I'd love to chat.

It meant a lot to me to spend Advent with you. Know that I'm praying for you as we enter the New Year. There is more adventure ahead, loved ones. Who knows what we shall see!

For now, mercy and grace, Lori

