



# *Sacred Pause*

REFLECTIONS ON LONGING AND HOPE

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## **HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL**

This devotional has been created to help you focus on the message of Advent and Christmas. There is a daily prayer, a daily scripture reading, two weekly devotionals, and space for you to make notes and record prayers.

## **DEVOTIONAL THEME**

This devotional is an invitation to both pause and renewal. An opportunity to allow the season of Advent to mentor you in “the unforced rhythms” of Divine Grace (Matt 28:11 MSG). In the weeks ahead, our heartfelt wish for you is to breath deep breaths and to take long pauses so that resilient hope awakens in your heart, transforming your life and communities.

## **DAILY PRAYER PROMPT**

Each day before you read the scriptures, we ask that you pray the simple prayer prompt provided for that days reading. This prayer will help you engage in listening to what the Holy Spirit wants to speak to you from the daily reading.

## **DAILY SCRIPTURE READING**

Each scripture reading will help to immerse you into the story of Christ’s restorative work in coming as the promised Messiah.

## **DEVOTIONAL**

Two weekly devotionals, one for Sunday and one for Wednesday, have been prepared to encourage you and to sensitize you to the activity of the Spirit in this holiday season. Additionally, there is room for you to take notes, jot down thoughts, and record prayers.

## **ADVENT WREATH**

The Advent wreath consists of four candles arranged equidistant in a circle. The wreath usually consists of evergreen branches arranged in a circle to symbolize eternity, and as a reminder that God has no beginning or end. Similarly, the evergreen branches also serve as a symbol of eternal life and a reminder that God is unchanging.

The Advent wreath is a tool to foster devotion and is usually incorporated during dinner time, or during nightly prayers. For families with young children, the Advent wreath is a wonderful way to help spark wonder in the hearts of babies, kids, and teenagers alike as each week the light from the candles grows brighter.

# *An Invitation to Pause*

Introduction by Robert Gorini

Have you ever heard something that immediately struck you and has forever stuck with you? I've experienced several moments like this, but none have been as transformative as my initial encounter with "Mercury" by Sleeping at Last. The band's front-man and songwriter, Ryan O'Neal, beautifully penned the lyrics: "God knows, I am dissonance waiting to be swiftly pulled into tune." This lyric has imprinted itself deeply into my heart, finding a permanent home on my arm, nestled between Psalm 103:14, which reads, "For He knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust." Never before have another person's words encapsulated the experience of living in my skin as O'Neal's have. I am, indeed, a dissonance awaiting resolution, navigating a life of discord in a world that often seems out of tune, all the while yearning for harmony with my Creator. I find comfort in knowing that God bears witness to the human condition, to my condition. The season of Advent is an annual reminder that God sees, God knows, and God bears witness to our journey.

Tish Harrison Warren writes, "We prepare for Christmas not only with shopping lists and decorations but by making space for mourning." For many of us Warren's statement feels inherently dissonant and unnecessarily melancholy in the glowing lights of the Christmas season. During the Advent season we are invited to allow ourselves to feel the tension of inexpressible joy and inescapable sorrow. To do this well, we need spiritual practices that ground us in the reality of life as it is now, and compel us toward hope in the life that is to come. Not unlike the season of Lent, Advent is the fast before the feast. Three spiritual practices in Advent are aimed at helping us celebrate Christmas to its fullest. Repentance, preparation, and anticipation are the spiritual mentors of God's people during this preparatory season and are aimed at deepening, not obstructing, our coming joy on Christmas day. Advent is a sacred pause; a holy hush before the Christmas push that we don't realize we need.

The Advent season in our culture has been intertwined with chocolate-calendars and Costco wine-tasting boxes (both great). Consequently, the preparatory spiritual practices of Advent are often conflated with the celebratory distractions inherent in Christmas. The danger in removing the preparatory pause before the "big push" is that some of us inadvertently allow the distractions of the Christmas season to numb the aching in our hearts rather than transform it. Sorrow and grief must be acknowledged, named, and offered to God in order for

them to be transformed in hope. Repentance, preparation, and anticipation mentor us in the practice of resilient hope.

Resilient hope is the fruit that the Advent pause is meant to awaken inside us. For hope to be resilient it must be grounded in reality. Resilient hope sees the world as it is now, but also as it could be, and one day will be. The hope awakened in Advent is found in identifying with the longing of Israel back-then, so that we can rightly anticipate and beckon the coming of Christ in the here-and-now, and in the age-to-come. “The final return of Christ,” continues Warren:

... is the undoing of cancer. It is the utter dismantling of white supremacy and racism. It is the delivery of justice for the victimized, for the weakest and the most vulnerable whom the powerful have brutalized with seeming impunity. It is the regeneration of dead coral reefs. It is the end of global pandemics. It is the vindication of those falsely imprisoned. It is the weeping of children giving way to their eternal laughter. It is the death of death.

Christmas shopping, nostalgic carols, and holiday cheer (while all having their rightful place), end up being small joys in comparison to restorative justice. God’s restorative justice in, for, and through creation is what Christmas is all about. Advent is a season to lay aside our “little hopes, our false hopes” by teaching us the way of resilient hope as we anticipate Christ’s restorative justice in all creation. Restorative justice calls for deep celebration. Deep, lasting joy is born of both laughter and tears, knows both sorrow and cheer, and transforms both persons and communities because it is grounded in reality while looking to eternity. The late Robert Webber helps bring the transformative power of Advent into view writing, “... we are called to a new awareness of life, to new commitments, to a new conversion of the soul. Whenever this happens an Advent has occurred, for Advent is the time when God breaks in on us with new surprises and touches us with a renewing restoring power.”

This devotional is an invitation to both pause and renewal. An opportunity to allow the season of Advent to mentor you in “the unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 28:11 MSG). In the weeks ahead, our heartfelt wish for you is to bask in the radiance of divine joy. May the light of Christ's arrival illuminate your hearts, casting a brilliant and multifaceted array of colors, like a radiant prism. We also invite you to breath deep breaths and to take long pauses so that resilient hope awakens in you.







# Weekly Readings

## **Sunday, Dec 3rd | 1st Candle**

Emphasis: His Coming

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Monday, December 4th**

Emphasis: His Peace

Reading: Isaiah 11

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Tuesday, December 5th**

Emphasis: His Suffering

Reading: Isaiah 53:1-6

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Wednesday, December 6th**

Emphasis: His Birthplace

Reading: Micah 5:2-5

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Thursday, December 7th**

Emphasis: His Kingship

Reading: Zechariah 9:9-13

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Friday, December 8th**

Emphasis: At the Right Time

Reading: Galatians 4:4-7

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in and through my life today."

## **Saturday, December 9th**

Emphasis: By the Holy Spirit

Reading: Matthew 1:18-24

Pray: "Open my eyes to behold the new thing you are doing in



The Old Testament reading in the Revised Common Lectionary (RLC) for the Second Sunday of Advent this year is Isaiah 40:1-11. For those unfamiliar with the lectionary, it is a beautiful resource that originated in Jewish synagogues and was later adopted by the early church. The RLC assigns specific texts to be read in public worship throughout the year in accordance with particular occasions. The RLC follows the Christian liturgical calendar providing a reading from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and New Testament letters for each Sunday. Today's reading is from Isaiah 40:1-11:

1 Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers; the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers; the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him and his recompense before him. 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:1-11 NRSVUE)

Isaiah 40:1-11 is my favorite passage in the entire Bible. It's both personally and professionally important to me since I wrote my dissertation on the Book of Isaiah in which I carefully investigated this passage. This passage helped sustain my faith during a very difficult time in my life. It is both an odd and appropriate text for Advent, which is the season of waiting and longing for the coming of Christ. It is odd because at first glance it doesn't seem like an Advent or Christmas passage, but upon closer look, the themes of Isaiah 40 and their connection

to the season of Advent become apparent.

Many churches open the Advent season with the singing of the hymn, "O Come, O Come Immanuel." It's a beautiful and yet haunting hymn and certainly appropriate for Advent. The hymn begins in the following manner: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here." Certainly "O come, O come, Emmanuel," has to do with Advent and Christmas, but what does the ransom of captive Israel and the mourning of exiles have to do with this season of mirth and joy?

Isaiah 40:1-11 may very well have informed the author of this hymn since it announces the end of Israel's captivity in exile. In 587 BC Israel suffered its most catastrophic tragedy in ancient times. Up to this point Israel had established itself as a nation in the promised land. Jerusalem was its capital city and within its walls was the temple where the people would worship the LORD. A king, from the line of David, ruled from Jerusalem and protected its people from foreign invaders.

Yet in 587 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar breached Jerusalem's walls with his armies, burned and looted the temple, killed many of its citizens, captured the king, and dragged him off as a prisoner to Babylon along with many of Jerusalem's citizens. These events are described in 2 Kings 25:1-21 and the passage concludes with these words, "So Judah went into exile out of its land" (25:21, NRSVUE).

Exile would wreak havoc upon the Jewish people. God describes the devastating effects of exile in the following manner: "One third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you; one third shall fall by the sword around you; and one third I will scatter to every wind and will unsheathe the sword after them" (Ezek 5:12). The horror of exile continued much after the initial conquest of Jerusalem, in the form of the plight of refugees. Some scholars estimate that Jerusalem's population was 250,000 prior to the exile and only 24,000 after! Scholars further estimate that 30,000 people were taken into exile, which means that a staggering 196,000 people were either killed or displaced due to the Babylonian conquest.

The exiles that survived were taken away from their homeland as prisoners of war to Babylon, the capital of their enemies. Psalm 137 captures this experience of exile: "By the rivers of

Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” (Ps 137). Exile for God’s people was a period of both mourning and lament. It meant the loss of home, the death of family, and the collapse of community. Exile meant living in a foreign place where you were persecuted for your faith and tempted by idols. Perhaps worst of all, exile felt like your God had abandoned you.

Isaiah 40:1-11 is addressed to God’s people living in exile and it is the announcement of good news. God announces in 40:1-2 that Israel’s time of suffering in exile is over and that it is now time to return home. Whereas the people felt that the glory of God had abandoned them, in 40:3-5 we hear that in the wilderness, in the very place of exile, the glory of the LORD is revealed. Verses 6-8 demonstrate that even though the faith of God’s people may fail, God’s promises never do. In vs 9-11 God announces that he is coming in might and will gather His people as their Shepherd and will bring them back to Jerusalem. The good news of Isaiah is that the exile was only temporary; it was never to last forever.

This passage is appropriate for Advent because Advent signals that the good news of Christmas is soon to arrive. What Isaiah and Advent acknowledge is that exile, the experience of displacement, loneliness, and abandonment is part of the experience of faith. God’s people have experienced exile for centuries. The message of Isaiah and Advent is not that God’s people will never experience such things, but rather such experiences do not last forever. The message of Isaiah and Advent is that God does new things, that our past doesn’t have to be our future, and therefore we need not despair. Isaiah goes on to say, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isa 43:18-19).

## **Thoughts for Reflection:**

Take a moment to consider areas of your life, things in your community, and in the greater world where there are experiences of displacement, loneliness, abandonment, and grief.

Take those things to God and ask God to come to rescue, redeem, and renew.

Bring your experiences of brokenness that have been long standing knowing that the Babylonian exile for Israel lasted a long time – 70 years. But it didn't last forever! Know that the same God continues to bring people out of exile today.

## **Notes:**

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## **Closing Prayer:**

Lord, I offer to you my feelings of displacement and loneliness trusting that you are still a God that redeems and renews. I bring to you the brokenness of my life and my world, asking that You come quickly to restore and redeem all things. Open my eyes to behold the “new thing” you are doing in and through my life today.



*Fulfilled Prophecies,  
Wilderness Journeys,  
and Renewal*

Week 1: Wednesday Devotion by Bo H. Lim



In the previous devotional, I discussed how the RCL designates four distinct Scripture readings for a particular Sunday, encompassing selections from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and New Testament letters. For instance, on that specific day, the Old Testament reading was Isaiah 40:1-11, while the Gospel reading came from Mark 1:1-8, which reads as follows:

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight,'" 4 so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

If it wasn't already evident that Isaiah 40:1-11 serves as a text relevant to Advent and Christmas, Mark's introduction in 1:1 underscores the connection. Mark indicates in his opening verses that it is Isaiah who announces the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark 1:3 is a direct quotation of Is 40:3, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'. Later in the passage, Isa 40:9 reads, "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings." In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word used for "good tidings" is euangelizo, the same word the NT authors use for "good news" (see Mark 1:1). It's no wonder Christmas carols speak of "Good tidings" and exhort us to "Go, tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere" drawing their language from Isaiah's prophetic pronouncement.

Mark repeatedly references Isaiah 40:1-11 in his Gospel's opening, highlighting his belief that Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. Mark believes Jesus is not just any good news; Jesus is the Gospel according to Isaiah. It is Jesus who is the glory of

God revealed in the wilderness. It is Jesus who brings an end to captivity and gathers God's people back to Zion. It is Jesus who brings an end to exile.

Interestingly, Mark's interpretation of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:1-11 seems odd since, as I mentioned in my Sunday devotional, Isaiah prophesied the end of exile many centuries earlier. Isaiah 40:1-11 is proclaimed to exiles living under Babylonian captivity, and we know that in 538 BC the Persian king Cyrus, after defeating Babylon, announced to the Israelites that they could return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Ezra 1:2-3 contains this decree of Cyrus:

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Israel would return home from Babylon, but life in Jerusalem for the next several centuries would never return back to what Israel experienced prior to the exile. Israel did return to the land, resettled Jerusalem, and rebuilt the temple but they continued to be ruled by a foreign empire and lacked complete autonomy. They would never again have a Davidic king, who they referred to as the Messiah (meaning "Anointed One"), lead them as in the days before the exile. Israel would continue to live under foreign occupation for the next several centuries. Once released from Babylonian captivity they would immediately be ruled by the Persians, followed then by the Greeks, and by the time of Jesus it was the Romans who occupied the land of Israel.

Exile is not only a political reality, but it also describes the spiritual condition of God's people. Since the New Heavens and Earth is our eternal home, God's people are pilgrims and sojourners in our present lives. The good news of Advent and Christmas is that God's Messiah has come in the person of Jesus Christ to rescue people from captivity. This captivity may be physical, political, economic, social, or spiritual in nature.

Mark in his reading of Isaiah focuses on the place of God's advent. Isaiah makes clear that it is to occur in the wilderness, or what we would understand as the desert. God's glory will not show up just anywhere, but in a particular place, and in this case a place of desolation. John the Baptizer has been reading Isaiah

and knows that it is to this location God will show up. Mark 1:5 describes how people from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem had to leave their places of comfort and security and travel all the way out into the desert to meet with God. Doing so was not merely a physical move, but it also signified the spiritual act of repentance and confession of sin. It was to those who were humble and contrite who met Jesus. Mark indicates that God's advent comes to those, borrowing the language from Isa 40:3, who "prepare the way of the LORD" and "make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3, NRSV).

The Christmas carol that announces "Joy to the World, the LORD is come" also exhorts, "Let every heart prepare Him room." Advent is the period of preparation to await Christmas. How is one to prepare one's "room" for Jesus? Sadly, we all know Christmas can be everything and anything but a time of spiritual renewal. Mark tells us that preparation for Jesus is to include confession of sin and repentance. While for some the mention of "confessing sin" and "repentance," may trigger experiences of unhealthy guilt and legalism, Mark views repentance as "good news."

Today, as was the case in days of John the Baptist, meeting Jesus requires people to leave their places of comfort and security to be in a desolate state. As mentioned in my devotional on Isaiah 40:1-11, the good news of Advent and Christmas is that in Jesus we can have a fresh start. Our old sinful ways do not need to define our future. The season of Advent & Christmas fall at the end of the calendar year, where people reflect upon the past year and make resolutions for the year to come. Advent signals to us that 2024 is filled with new possibilities for those who seek renewal and transformation.

### **Thoughts for Reflection:**

Contemplate the symbolism of the wilderness or desert as the location of God's advent. In the midst of desolation, God's glory is revealed, emphasizing the idea that true spiritual preparation often involves leaving one's comfort zone, confessing sins, and repenting to make way for a meaningful encounter with Jesus during Advent.

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### **Closing Prayer:**

God, help me to begin this year with a fresh start. Give me the strength to not allow my past to define my future. Open my eyes to perceive the new possibilities for rebirth and renewal in my life and in the world around me.





# Weekly Readings

## **Sunday, December 10<sup>th</sup> | 2<sup>nd</sup> Candle**

Emphasis: The Word Became Flesh

Reading: John 1

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Monday, December 11<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: His Divine Being

Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Tuesday, December 12<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: His Superiority

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-14

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Wednesday, December 13<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: He Humbled Himself

Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Thursday December 14<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: His Offering for Sin

Reading: Romans 8:1-4

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Friday, December 15<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: His Gift to Us

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."

## **Saturday, December 16<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: He is the Image of God

Reading: Colossians 1:15-29

Pray: "Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life."





We do not like waiting. So, we designed a world to minimize waiting as much as possible. Highways have express lanes and airports have TSA Pre-Check. If fast food is not fast enough, we can order food ahead and have it ready for a quick pick up. When we binge watch our favorite shows, we can skip the intro sequence, jump forward in timeline, and immediately start the next episode without sitting in suspense and anticipation. Waiting is something we barely tolerate when we must but not something we choose willingly.

The season of Advent is a gift to the Church because it invites us to slow down, pause, and wait. Every year, this liturgical season helps us to remember that we are a holy people called to embrace a different way of life from the world. We typically think of Advent as the four-week period leading up to Christmas, but it is actually so much more. The Latin word, *adventus* is a translation of the Greek word, *parousia* that means “presence,” “arrival,” or “coming.” *Parousia* refers not only to Jesus’ first coming at Christmas but also to his second coming. So, we are not simply preparing to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus in the Advent season; we are leaning into the promise and hope of Jesus’ glorious return as the King. The question is, then, how do we wait well?

Addressing the Gentile and Jewish believers in Asia Minor, Peter describes the reason for their waiting and the proper posture of waiting for God: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance...what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting and hastening the coming of the day of God. .?” (2 Peter 3:9-13). Peter tells the believers that the reason for our present waiting is God’s longsuffering love for sinners and his desire for all people to come to his saving knowledge. God has not forgotten his promise and he is not dragging his feet! Those who understand this should not lose heart but live diligently with expectant hope for the fulfillment of his promise.

Peter’s words remind us that we have outward and inward work to do in our waiting between the first Christmas and Jesus’ triumphant return. God patiently waits for the last day so that all people have a chance to hear the gospel and respond to God’s offer of salvation. The Church is called to the external work of sharing the good news of Jesus with the world. But we are also called to inward work: “leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting and hastening.” Peter goes on to describe the internal

work in verses 14-18, “while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish...but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

This Advent, may we slow down and reflect on what we wait for and how we wait. Henri Nouwen says, “[Christian] waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more.” We wait for Jesus’ reappearance with expectant hope and confidence because we have received the gift of salvation through his first coming. We do not wait in vain with nothing to lean on. May God help us to embrace our identity as his people who not only wait but wait well.

## Thoughts for Reflection:

Think about a time in your life when you wanted to fast-forward through a time of waiting (e.g., waiting to start a relationship, waiting on a job or school application, waiting to buy a home). Looking back on that time, what was the seed that God was growing in you that you can now see?

As you slow down and pause this Advent season, reflect on what Peter says about the Lord patiently giving people time to repent and turn to him before he returns. What inward work is God asking you to take up today (e.g., being blameless, watchful, sober-minded)? How might you lean into the outward work (e.g., proclaiming the good news to the nations)?

## Notes

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## Closing Prayer:

Gracious Lord, we confess that we do not celebrate your first Advent well and are not prepared well for your second Advent. Give us the faith and patience to wait on you and trust in your promises. We submit to the work the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives and ask you to grow our courage so that we may participate in the hastening of your return. Amen.

# *Revealing Silence*

Week 2: Wednesday Devotion by Ahmi Lee

Silence is dreadful. Think of the awkward lull in a conversation with your boss or the long pause of your doctor before she shares the result of your recent medical exam. Silence is not just associated with bad cell phone reception, but for many of us, it is a trigger for our deepest pain, trauma, and fear. It reminds us of an unanswered prayer or an experience that made us feel forgotten and rejected. Painful past experiences have led us to believe that silence is the precursor to bad news, a sign of disapproval, disengagement, and distance.

The Bible overflows with stories and examples that challenge our common perception of silence but two are particularly relevant to the season of Advent. The first is the great silence of God for 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. The final words of the Old Testament promise the coming age of the Messiah who will transform people's hearts: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (Malachi 4:5-6). With these words, God stopped revealing anything new in the way he had until then. But the period of long silence that followed during the intertestamental period did not mean that God forgot his promise or that he gave up on the world. God was active behind the scenes orchestrating the historical events for his appointed time for the arrival of Jesus, the long-awaited Savior. This is why the opening verse of the book of Mark, which is thought to be the first gospel account, is exhilarating news: "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). From this we see that God's silence does not always signal an end but rather foreshadows unfathomable good that is revealed at the right time.

The second instance of God's silence is in response to Jesus' heart-wrenching cry on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). These words echo King David's lament in Psalm 22 when his enemies mocked him for trusting God to save him. In a prophetic way, David's affliction in this psalm captures the agony of the dying Messiah on the cross many centuries later. Some theologians say that Jesus was not alienated from God on the cross in a true sense, which implies that he became less divine. Others believe that by taking on our sin, Jesus experienced the horror of real separation from the Holy Father and the Spirit. Either way, Jesus' words clearly point to the incredible mystery of the incarnation: though he was God, he willingly assumed our humanity and fully

identified with our grief, pain, and distress to restore every aspect of our broken being as only a true God can. Therefore, God's silence to Jesus is not a sad ending to a tragic story but is to our benefit and blessing. The Father's silence speaks a thousand words of love, sorrow, wrath, and approval as the obedient Son became sin for our sake though he was sinless (2 Cor 5:21) and accomplished the will of the triune God to save the lost.

These two instances that bookend Jesus' earthly ministry show that silence is not a sign of God's indifference, powerlessness, or absence. Behind every painful still moment in our life is not a reticent God who withholds affection and hides himself when we most need him. We know from Scripture that God is in the business of revealing: he delights to make his glory, beauty, and will known to the world. Nothing reminds us of this truth more clearly than the person of Christ. Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1) who broke into the world one silent night to declare that God is with us (Matt 1:23) and for us (Rom 8:31). Let this truth speak louder than the silence in your life. This Advent, as you discover anew God's nearness to you, may you be filled with the assurance of love, hope, joy, and peace.

### **Thoughts for Reflection:**

What areas of your life do you feel God is silent? Be attentive to what is going on in your life and ask the Holy Spirit to help name your fears, anxieties, and pain.

Reflect on what God is revealing about himself through today's devotional. How is the Spirit transforming your understanding of God, yourself, and the world?

What is God inviting you to do in light of what he has shown you? How does it impact your role in the family, community, and our church?

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### **Closing Prayer:**

Father, thank you for the gift of your Son who is the Word of Life. Help me to know that you are working in my life and in the world through the comforting presence of your Spirit. Grant me the courage now to go to languishing people in silence to herald the great news of our Savior.

# *The Child is Born*

Week 3: Dec 17<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>



# Weekly Readings

## **Sunday, December 17<sup>th</sup> | 3<sup>rd</sup> Candle**

Emphasis: Coming Light

Reading: Isaiah 2:9-7

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Monday, December 18<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: Preceded by John

Reading: Luke 1:5-17

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Tuesday, December 19<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Lord is With You

Reading: Luke 1:21-38

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Wednesday, December 20<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: With Great Rejoicing

Reading: Luke 1:39-45

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Thursday, December 21<sup>st</sup>**

Emphasis: The Birth of Jesus

Reading: Luke 2:1-7

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Friday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Emphasis: The Angel's Good News

Reading: Luke 2:8-14

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

## **Saturday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Emphasis: The Shepherds Find Him

Reading: Luke 2:15-21

Prayer Prompt: "Thank you for sending Your Son to demonstrate Your everlasting love for me."

# *Advent is a Mirror*

Week 3: Sunday Devotion by Joel Jin

As we approach the Christmas season, we often find ourselves immersed in the busyness of life. We're working hard to support our families, to care for a loved one, or to advance in our education or career. It's a season where some are fortunate to receive bonuses at work, gifting others out of their overabundance, others are grinding through extra shifts, and students are racing to the winter break. Our society rewards us for pushing through tough times to be exceptional, but amidst the chaos of the season, it's crucial to pause.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the good news of Jesus' birth is presented to the earliest Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. What's striking is how they choose to start their narratives. Rather than beginning with grand proclamations, they introduce us to a baby—a helpless and dependent infant. This baby was born to a young couple in a small town. Baby Jesus, son of a carpenter, had no degrees, no titles, and relied on his parents like any other baby. He was the epitome of helpless and dependent.

Advent serves as a mirror, reflecting how we accept God. Can we truly accept the Almighty Creator of the universe, who chose to come to us in human form? Can we grasp the humility of God, who became a defenseless infant? Well, perhaps this helpless and dependent Jesus is acceptable because he will be exceptional. One day he will demonstrate his gift in academic and religious circles, he will perform miracles, he will be followed by masses, and eventually he will save the world. Yet I wonder if my love can mature. Rather than based on what Jesus could do for me one day, I seek a pure love for who he is. Like marriage, I love my wife just for who she is, no matter if she bakes a couple dozen cranberry, chocolate, pumpkin muffins each autumn.

Advent is a mirror, reflecting how we accept others. Dr. Karen Rosenberg, a biological anthropologist, summarizes the biological, psychological, and social function of a helpless human infancy, which is an advantage to make connections with caregivers and a community while learning about the physical and emotional worlds at rapid rates. Helplessness and dependency draw us closer to one another. If the most vulnerable and the “the least of these” offer us an opportunity to strengthen our community, then perhaps it's time for us to accept the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Matt 24:31-46).

Even more, advent prompts us to consider whether we

believe God accepts us, with all our vulnerabilities and imperfections. In our lives, we often work tirelessly at work or at home. How often do we find ourselves compulsively working, driven by the fear of rejection or inadequacy in the eyes of others? How frequently do we hide ourselves, concerned that our true selves might not be accepted? We conceal our fears and insecurities so much that we forget who we are.

We yearn for acceptance, not only from one another but ultimately from God. The Christmas season is a powerful reminder that God has extended acceptance to us. The humble arrival of Christ in a manger demonstrates that God's love is unconditional, embracing us in our humanity and imperfections.

Acceptance from God is unlike any other form of acceptance. American Franciscan priest Richard Rohr observes, "as we come to a deeper acceptance of our True Self, we know our identity comes from God's love, not from what other people think or say about us." While the world may place conditions on love and approval, God's love is boundless and all-encompassing. We are held in God's heart and mind as worthy and cherished, not because of our achievements, titles, or fame, but because of our inherent worth as children and creation.

This Advent season, let's remember that the true meaning of Christmas lies in the acceptance of God's love. God saw fit to accept us as we are, and through Christ, God invites us to accept eternal love and grace.

### **Thoughts for Reflection:**

Take a moment to reflect on your own life. Are there areas where you struggle with acceptance, either from others or from God? Are there fears or anxieties that keep you from fully embracing your true self?

### **Notes:**

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### **Closing Prayer:**

Holy Spirit give me counsel and reassurance. Help me to remember that I am accepted and loved unconditionally by the Creator of the universe, who chose to become a helpless infant to demonstrate an everlasting love for me.

# *The Gift of Acceptance*

Week 3: Wednesday Devotion by Faith Suh

I think one of the most common phenomena we experience is waiting and longing for acceptance. We anticipate belonging to certain groups throughout our lives. As young children, it starts with the anticipation for fun, play, and acceptance by our parents. During the adolescent years, it is the tumultuous, anxiety-ridden anticipation that comes with settling in the “right” clique (or if you’re lucky, The Popular One).

In elementary school, I had befriended one of the few other Korean American girls (I shall refer to her as Jo). One day, I was invited to Jo’s house for a playdate. Her mother came over to meet me, and it was very clear she was not impressed by my clumsy *insa* (greeting). She seemed even more offended by my embarrassed and confused expression, realizing that I neither speak nor understand Korean. Over the next few days, Jo had become distant and began avoiding me. No matter how many times I tried to play with her, she ignored me and would only talk with another Korean American girl named Beth (whose name has been changed). Finally, after days of begging Jo to tell me why she would no longer play with me, the truth was revealed. She said, “My mom doesn’t want me to be friends with you anymore because you can’t speak Korean”. Her rejection is one of my earliest memories of when I realized how flawed we are in our failure to be accepting of one another.

As the years went on, it seemed as if I had no agency in my relationships, and I was always falling short of standards imposed by family and friends. For kids at school, I was judged as not Korean enough. For college peers, it was the opposite and I was dismissed due to my non-whiteness. At my previous church, it was because I was not feminine in the “right” ways. My loneliness grew as I felt less and less accepted by others. Thoughts like, “what is it about me that people don’t like?” or “why am I so inadequate?” paralyzed me with fear and anxiety during interactions with coworkers and church acquaintances.

Loneliness, according to the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, is the “new public health epidemic” in the U.S. His 85-page advisory estimates that approximately “half of adults are lonely.” While this staggering figure paints a tragic picture, it also serves as proof that many of us are experiencing the same pain of loneliness. We experience loneliness when we lack the freedom to be our true selves, and I believe that is what we yearn for in our relationships.

I don’t think this longing for acceptance is unrealistic. In fact,

I think it's an echo of our purpose - that we were made to be fully and unconditionally accepted by God.

The Jesus I knew in my childhood was immune to human needs and feelings. But the Jesus I have come to know now is a Savior who sought friendship and loved doing life with others. How validating it truly is, knowing that God knows what it is like to crave community and feel alone. I imagine Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, beseeching God to take away the burden of His impending death. How utterly alone must He have felt in that moment? How hurt did Jesus feel when He was rejected by one of his closest friends?

When we are baptized, we are asked, "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" This question now carries a new meaning for me as we celebrate and reflect during Advent. It is humbling to realize that God, in all His glory, invites us into a relationship with Him. That we have a Heavenly Father who desires acceptance and love from us just as we yearn for the same in Him. Theologian John Zizioulas states, "the being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God." He also describes a social Trinity, which essentially affirms God's relational nature. To be honest, when I first heard of this term, I initially thought he was referring to some sort of Holy club where everyone could join and have a great party. Maybe he was! Regardless, I think it is fitting that we long for closeness and acceptance because as Zizioulas said, we have been made in the image of a "relational God."



## **Thoughts for Reflection:**

Take a moment now to reflect on this truth: God wholly delights in you. His heart breaks just as much as yours in times of loneliness. He longs to comfort you in His warm embrace when others do not. He created you in love and with purpose.

Take another moment to ask yourself these questions as you reflect on how loneliness has impacted you and others in your life. When do you feel lonely? How do you define acceptance in yourself and of others? Who are those in your life that need liberation from their loneliness?

## **Notes:**

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## **Closing Prayer:**

God, please meet me in my loneliness. Speak the truth of acceptance and belonging into my heart and affirm Your love for me. Help me to know that I truly belong to You; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that I truly belong to others. Give me the sensitivity and courage to meet others in their loneliness offering them the gift of solidarity.



# Weekly Readings

## **Sunday, December 24<sup>th</sup> | 4<sup>th</sup> Candle**

Emphasis: Coming Light

Reading: Isaiah 2:9-7

Prayer Prompt: "Shine Your Light Upon my Heart."

## **Monday, December 25<sup>th</sup> | Merry Christmas!**

Emphasis: Rejoice, Heaven is on Earth!

Reading: Luke 2

Prayer Prompt: "Glory to God in the highest! Let there be peace on earth!"

## **Tuesday, December 26<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Magi's Search

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Prayer Prompt: God, help me to pause and name the suffering in the world and pray for the miracle of peace."

## **Wednesday, December 27<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Flight to Egypt

Reading: Matthew 2:13-18

Prayer Prompt: "God, help me to pause and name the suffering in the world and pray for the miracle of peace."

## **Thursday, December 28<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Return to Nazareth

Reading: Matthew 2:19-23

Prayer Prompt God, help me to pause and name the suffering in the world and pray for the miracle of peace."

## **Friday, December 29<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Father's House

Reading: Luke 2:41-52

Prayer Prompt: God, help me to pause and name the suffering in the world and pray for the miracle of peace."

## **Saturday, December 30<sup>th</sup>**

Emphasis: The Scripture is Fulfilled

Reading: Luke 4:16-22

Prayer Prompt: God, help me to pause and name the suffering in the world and pray for the miracle of peace."



In these times of global conflict and unfathomable human suffering, my spirit longs for peace and restoration. The Advent season asks us to pause in expectant waiting. I am reminded that as Christians, we navigate the liminal space between what is and the not yet.

I have often thought about these two states—the present and the future—as a polarity (the state of opposites with contradictory tendencies). The stark contrast has me vacillating between two opposites of evil and good. Lately I have been considering the present and future as a continuum (something that keeps going and changes slowly over time). In this way, I can see both human flourishing and suffering, life and death, light and darkness often sharing similar spaces. Polarities make it impossible for me to square my theological belief in an all-loving and omnipotent God with the fact of suffering in the world. But continuum thinking challenges me to transcend the either-or binary and embody the present, trusting that the Spirit of God is at work in a very messy world.

Jesus was born into this mess in the land of Palestine that was once part of the Roman empire. He had no state, crown, or permanent home. Jesus knew and experienced liminal living, and he has shown us ways to navigate the messy paradoxes of this great continuum of life.

Continued ...

**Thoughts for reflection:**

Consider these verses from Lamentations 3:22-23 (NIV):  
Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,  
For his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

What is God calling you to lament?  
What is God calling you to hope for?

**Notes:**

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**Closing Prayer:**

God, help us to pause and name the suffering in the world. Rather than close our eyes to present-day realities, allow us to experience your presence and pray for the miracle of peace in the Middle East, Ukraine, and other places marked by conflict. We long and pray for your restoration.



Merry Christmas  
Rejoice! Heaven  
is on Earth.



"For unto you is  
born this day in the  
city of David a  
Savior, who is  
Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:11

*To Matter and Contribute:  
A Meditation  
on Connectivity*

Week 4: Wednesday Devotion by Helen Chung

The autumn season is my favorite time of the year. When I walk through a forest in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, I am amazed by the ferns, pine, and birds existing in an interdependent cycle of life. Lately, I have been reading the work of biomimicry researcher Janine Benyus, who believes that the natural world teaches humans about connectivity as the natural state of being across all species. On my hikes, I tend to observe Douglas firs as individual giants when in fact they are part of a broader ecosystem, inextricably connected to their neighboring trees and plants by underground root systems and mycelium, a network of mycorrhizal fungi. This mycelial network is called the Wood Wide Web, and it transports water and chemicals between trees, enabling them to communicate with one another for the purpose of survival and flourishing. I am humbled by this fact, and also inspired by the Bible's depictions of trees as living communicators.

“And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (Isaiah 55:12)

“Let the trees of the forest sing, let them sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.”  
(Chronicles 16:33)

As members of a Christian community, we are inextricably connected. We need each other. Community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky proposed that human beings have two fundamental needs—to matter (experience human dignity) and to contribute to the mattering of others. This is congruent with God's second great command: Love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31). Love is birthed in connection to self and others. As the trees are connected by their underground root systems, so too are we connected by our audible and hidden utterances for one another, conversations, and acts of service. In this advent season, I want to pause to show gratitude for the connections within my community and to mindfully consider the connections that may need my attention.

Continued ...

### **Thoughts for Reflection:**

“But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.” (Psalm 52:8)

In the above verse, what are the attributes of a tree that I can mimic as I seek to trust in God’s lovingkindness?

### **Notes:**

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### **Closing Prayer:**

God, I am inspired by your creation. When I consider how trees are connected to one another for their survival and well-being, I recognize that I am not alone. I am grateful for the connections who help me feel that I matter. Help me to show my gratitude. I also recognize that there are some connections (and disconnections) that are challenging and painful. Give me wisdom in knowing how to care for both myself and them.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, *Advent: The Season of Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2023), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Warren, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2004), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 90-91.

<sup>6</sup> Underground Network Distributes Resources. Biomimicry Institute. <https://asknature.org/strategy/fungal-network-distributes-resources/>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Surgeon General Cites Loneliness As Serious Mental Health Hazard In New Report ([forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com))

<sup>8</sup> Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation ([hhs.gov](https://www.hhs.gov))

<sup>9</sup> Zizioulas, John D. "Being as communion: Studies in personhood and the church. London: Darton." (1985).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, Karen R. "The evolution of human infancy: why it helps to be helpless." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50 (2021): 423-440.

<sup>12</sup> What Is the False Self? — Center for Action and Contemplation ([cac.org](https://www.cac.org))



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