

ADVENT

*A pilgrimage through
the seasons*

ADVENT

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*An introduction to the Advent season and
an orientation of the next few weeks.*

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MARY'S MAGNIFICAT

*The song of Mary, the mother of God.
Blessed is she and so are you.*

A CHRISTMAS EVE READING

*Gather your family 'round or sit in silence
with the spirit of God. The story of Christ is told.*

A CHRISTMAS BLESSING

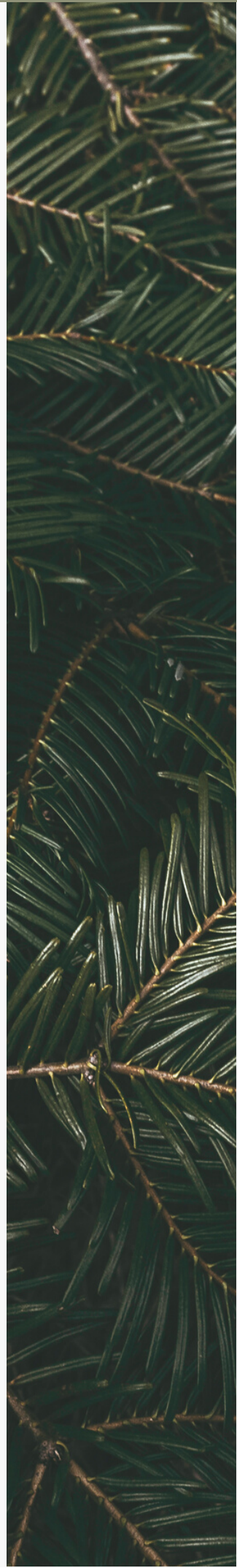
A blessing for this Christmas Day.

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

*A reading for December 26th. Christmas Day has
come, but the Christmas season is just beginning.*

EPIPHANY

*A reading for January 6th. On this final day of our
Christmas celebration, we ponder what comes next.*



A NEW SEASON



There are few things in life that are as predictable as the sunrise. Taxes, the swing of a pendulum, the sequence of a traffic light, the changing of the seasons. 365 days that make up a year, and an equal amount of visits from the sun. As our terrestrial globe orbits the sun-star on a yearlong journey, it makes a daily rotation giving the illusion that the sun rises and sets on our sliver of the earth. We measure time by where we are in our rotations, and we interpret seasons by our proximity to the sun.

Christmastime feels just about as inevitable as the sunrise, doesn't it? We know it's coming, but by the time it arrives we can hardly believe it. Its predictable arrival seems to catch us off guard, and each time it comes around it feels like it came to us quicker than before. That just seems to be how life moves. Both Christmastime and the sunrise seem to come about so fast, faster than I remembered, and then in the blink of an eye it's all over.

It can be said that time is going by faster than it ever has, but of course that's just an illusion. We've simply forgotten the art of waiting. We can get information in an instant, laundry soap from Amazon in a day, and because we don't need to wait for much anymore we have collectively exchanged the fruit of patience for the plague of anxiety.

Maybe you're feeling that now, an anxious anticipation of *the most wonderful time of the year as they call it*. If so, let's practice a breath prayer in this moment. Throughout our time together this season we're going to practice praying in a few different ways, so let's start now.

Breathe in and say *"I breathe in the peace of patience"*

Breathe out and say *"I breathe out the plague of anxiety"*

***Breathe in,
breathe out.***

***Breathe in,
breathe out.***

So here we are again, Christmas, and last Christmas feels both like yesterday and a lifetime ago. Again, time does not move faster, the earth stays spinning at a steady speed, but our perspective of time gets skewed by hockey practices, overtime hours, and global pandemics. Breath prayers and short readings can help return us to the ground for a moment, but now more than ever we need a means to stay rooted in time and in place for more than a moment, more than a season. We need to tell time by a sacred calendar.

Brian Zahnd says "we have a secular calendar to coordinate our lives within a secular age, and we have a sacred calendar to form our lives through the gospel story." Within the Great Tradition of following Jesus we do have a sacred calendar – a means of marking time throughout the course of the year by telling the story of Jesus Christ. Christmas has a day on the secular calendar, but the sacred calendar gives it a season. Advent is the season, meaning arrival or coming. It's a slow season of steady preparation, giving time and space for our weary hearts to truly anticipate their king.

In a sense, Advent is a bit of an act of modern resistance. Our secular culture speeds up at Christmastime promoting hurry, hustle, and bustle. The craving beast of careless consumerism gets fed. Advent resists this, calling us to attend to our hopeful longings by lighting candles, praying prayers, and reading scriptures. We wait. Even more than being a prophetic resistance against the busyness and consumerism of cultural Christmas, Advent is a way to become embodied in the story of the coming of Christ - Immanuel, when God became one of us. During Advent we prepare our hearts for this Christmas season, and we also prepare our hearts for when he will come again.

In the part of the northern hemisphere where I was raised and am now rooted, Advent bridges the transition from late fall to early winter. As the leaves fall and their branches become bare, I know Christmas is coming. When the first flakes of snow blanket the barren ground, I can sense that it has come. Although I experience Advent in winter, the southern residents of this spherical planet experience Christmastime in the inverse. Budding limbs give way to greenery, and Advent has an altogether different complexion.

That's much like life. Everything is seasonal, yet we don't all experience the same seasons at the same time. In that spirit, for the next four weeks this Advent devotional will explore all four seasons. Starting in spring and ending in winter, we will consider Christmas through the lens of story and scripture.

We coordinate our lives by a secular calendar, that much is unavoidable, but our lives are formed by the sacred calendar. As we give our attention and affection to the telling of the story of Jesus throughout the year, we will surely be guided into the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus. A new season begins now, not by doing, but in the waiting.

Let us pray.

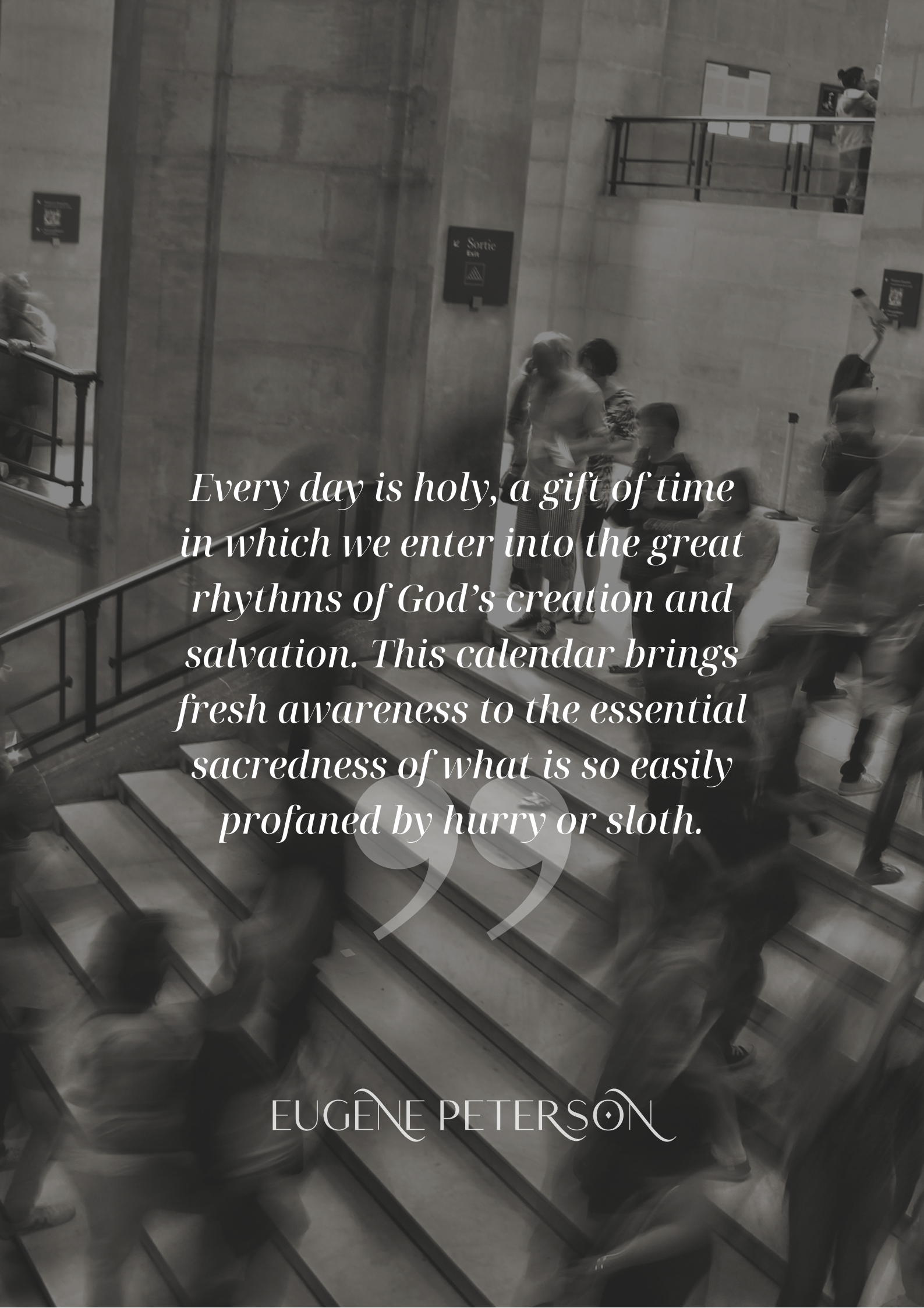
Alexander Mills

RECOMMENDED PRAYING

*God, I'm anxious in my waiting.
My world makes it feel impossible
to be patient, and I need your grace
to rest into this season of goodness.
Lead me by your non anxious presence
into paths of peace and rhythms of
grace.*

RECOMMENDED PLAYING

May You Find A Light, The Brilliance



*Every day is holy, a gift of time
in which we enter into the great
rhythms of God's creation and
salvation. This calendar brings
fresh awareness to the essential
sacredness of what is so easily
profaned by hurry or sloth.*

EUGÈNE PETERSON



WEEK ONE

SPRING

01

WEEK ONE GENESIS 3

As winter draws to an end with the sign of lengthening days, our to-do lists get longer in step. “Spring Cleaning” is a common list in many households as we awake from our hibernations to see the clutter and cobwebs that have amassed over the dark season. Tidy the basement, clean behind the appliances, flip the mattress, empty the garage. In our home it’s not the Spring Cleaning list that boasts the most items, but the Garden Prep Work items that are legion. By summer’s end our vegetable garden will be bursting with bounty and giving up enough produce to feed our family and friends, but the work necessary to reap a harvest begins in the spring.

Some springtime duties include sowing seedlings in trays indoors, situating them by a southern window to give them the best chance at sprouting. While they germinate inside, we work the soil outside by gently tilling it and adding last year’s compost to enrich the ground by regenerative means. We weed, we hoe, we rake. The true task is to time the maturation of our sprouts with the final frost. Transplant them to the earth too soon and they’ll wither under the weather. Transplant them too late and their season long growth will be stunted.

If we check off our list and execute our plans, we’ll say a prayer of gratitude standing barefoot in the dirt sometime in late May and entrust the earth to bear its fruit.

It's a bit reminiscent of the genesis of the Gospel story - a man and a woman, barefoot in a garden. You likely know how it goes; God created the heavens and the earth, hung the sun and the moon, brought forth soil and sprouts, and he called it good. From the earth he made man and woman too, both in the image of the inexplicably divine. It was good, and so were they.

It's a good origin story, but like any tale worth telling it wasn't long before trouble arose. Snakes aren't a detriment to the garden in our backyard, it's birds and aphids and rabbits and beetles that disrupt our plans. In the garden called Eden, it was a snake called the satan that disjointed the fellowship between gardener and garden-creator by sowing this seed of doubt - did God really mean what he said to you?

In other words, *can you trust him?*

In God's garden the promised provisions were peace, presence, and proximity. There was no separation between the creator and his creation. Yet under the seduction of a serpent both man and woman agreed with the accuser and welcomed another spirit into paradise. Evil was manifest in that forbidden fruit, and the world as it was intended broke loose from its formerly unaltered orbit.

The consequence was twofold; the serpent got cursed and the couple got cast out. Now beyond the united bond with the creator, the work of the man's hands would be tiresome and the labour of the woman's body will always be painful. To live outside the boundary of the garden of life is to exist in a world that inevitably ends in death. From dust they came, and due to sin, to dust they will return.





”

*yet in his
judgement he
proclaimed our
hidden hope*

Where there once was peace, there now is war. Tranquility once, toil now. In his proclamation of judgement, God engaged his enemy in a fight to the death - yet in his judgement he proclaimed our hidden hope. “The children of the accuser will bruise your heel” God said to Eve, but to the serpent he said “the children of Eve will crush your head”. Although entangled in a battle where the wager is death, the fatal and final blow will come from the body of the woman.

At the risk of skipping ahead to the end of the story (although I’d be surprised if you didn’t know where we are heading), Paul the apostle wrote that we are “saved through child bearing”. Indeed, women are not saviours of themselves by bearing the fruit of their own seed, but we have all been saved by the seed of one woman, the very seed of God himself. Our salvation is coming, our peace will return, our hope is not deferred. Yet here we are, waiting. How long will our struggle persist? Oh God, will you feel far off for just another moment, another minute, or another lifetime?

We find ourselves like Adam and Eve, asking in accusation, can we trust him? Can we believe that what was sown in the springtime ground will sprout and bear fruit? Can we wait with unfettered faith for things that we cannot see? Does God really long to linger with us in the garden once again?

The background of the entire page is a soft-focus photograph of cherry blossoms in full bloom. The flowers are a pale pink or white color, with delicate petals and visible stamens. They are clustered along dark, thin branches that crisscross the frame. The lighting is bright and even, suggesting a clear day. The overall aesthetic is peaceful and natural.

RECOMMENDED PRAYING

God I'm scared to admit that I have a hard time trusting you. At least in this I know I'm not alone.

I have a double-heart that wants to trust you yet defaults to trust myself. Unite my heart to long for you.

RECOMMENDED PLAYING

[Cherry Blossoms, Andy Squyres](#)



A SEASON OF WAITING

"Advent season is a season of waiting," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth."

He wrote this in a letter to his parents while imprisoned for his resistance efforts against the Hitler regime in World War II.



02

WEEK TWO
SUMMER



02

WEEK TWO ISAIAH 25

Before the fellowship between Creator and creation was ever fractured in that garden, a redemptive plan was put in motion and a course to return to communion was set. It was revealed early in Genesis that the son of the woman would win the war, and the serpent would not be the separation between God and man forever. Throughout the unfolding pages of the scriptures we learn that the story of God's children returning home progresses slowly but surely over the succeeding years, decades, and centuries.

Through Moses we learn of their wilderness wanderings, and through Kings we read about Israel's victories and defeats. Through the Psalms we witness their prayers, and through the Prophets we see visions of humanity restored. One prophet in particular spoke at length of a king to come and a kingdom that would come with him.

Isaiah saw visions of lions laying with lambs, he had dreams of the end of all wars and the increase of all peace, and he prophesied that the redeemed reality would come through the birth of a child to a virgin. The setting for all of this? Isaiah paints a poetic picture of this all taking place around a large banqueting table.

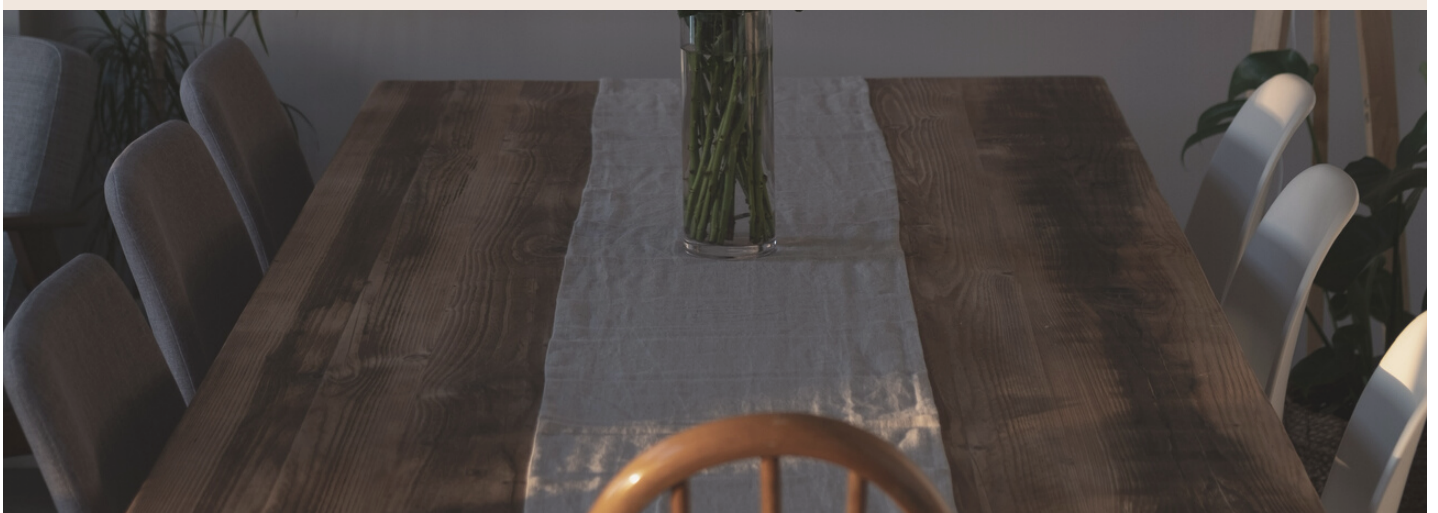
The summer season brings all sorts of gladness and glories. Vegetable gardens are growing at rapid speeds and tender fruits are ripening quickly. The days are long, affording ample opportunities for playing and pausing, and the nights are short, not wasting any time to enjoy the next day. One of my favourite summertime occasions happens in the middle of our backyard, taking place right at the intersection of the end of daylight and the beginning of a starlit night.

At that dusky hour under the lights that hang above our heads on the limbs of the trees, a couple dozen of our closest friends gather around a long table for the annual Mills Low Country Boil.

To describe this occasion as a banquet would be a generous glorification. It's more like a ravenous feast. There is no cutlery or place settings, only fingers and butcher paper.

There are no manners or pleasantries, only feasting and fellowship. The low country boil tradition comes from my wife's heritage, being born and raised in the southern United States with family in both South Carolina and Louisiana. The meal is simple in nature – boiled seafood, sausage, and vegetables poured out onto a harvest-style table and doused in seasoned butter. So much butter.

The food is tremendous (of course I'm not objective about that), but the fellowship is the true magic of the meal. There's a communal spirit that hovers as we partake in a feast like that, rubbing elbows and stepping on toes while butter drips and shells of fish fall. Truthfully I think it requires a great measure of humility to step up to the boil table. Old friendships are kindled, new relationships are born, and wounds even get mended around that table. Our bellies get fed, too.




The vision that Isaiah had of the world to come looks like a feast for all people. A rich meal of choice wines, those choice wines well refined, and select foods rich in flavour. The table is dressed with a tablecloth that has been repurposed. It once was the veil of death that covered all people, but now it has been redeemed and reused to set this feast for all God's children.

The one who sets this table and prepares this feast is the Lord, Isaiah testifies. "This is our God, for whom we have waited – and he has saved us! This is the Lord, for whom we have waited; let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

From the trenches of the cosmic battle and in the midst of the waiting for salvation, Isaiah assures God's people of this – death will die, God will breathe life into us once again, and we will be returned to the presence and proximity of God. The vision of God's victory is a dinner feast, a banqueting table set for friends and foes.

This is the very essence of Advent, as we wait and anticipate the coming of our king. In Jesus we believe that God has come and death has been defeated. We affirm that the world is being remade and redeemed as Christ reconciles all things to himself. We confess that all this is true, yet we remain living in the tension that the fullness of this vision has not yet been realized.



*in all these things,
practice resurrection*

The kingdom is here, but it is also not yet. The lion lays down with lambs, but wolves are still prowling. We see the path of peace that leads to the end of all war, yet there are not many on it. Bombs still fly, babies still die.

Christ has come, and Christ will also come again. We find ourselves in the middle, tasting salvation while also waiting for the fullness of the feast. What should we do while we're here? The poet suggests and I agree, we should "practice resurrection."

Set tables long enough for
friends and foes.

Resist war,
surrender your weapons,
start a garden.

Give away your money to the poor.
Build a bridge, take down a fence.

Live a quiet life.
Learn how to pray.
Belong to a church.

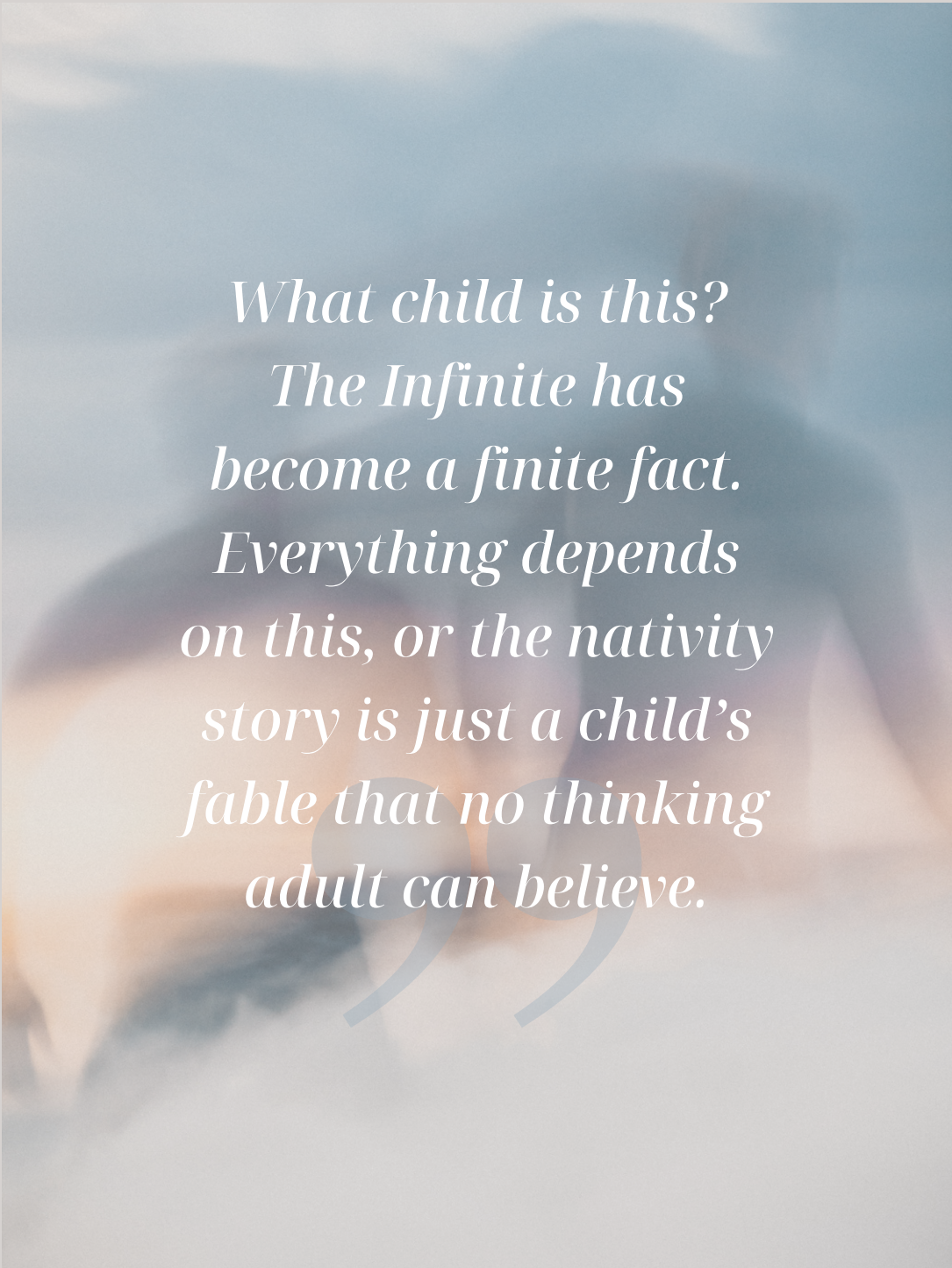
In all these things and more, practice resurrection. In your hearts and homes, do not become complacent in your waiting. Work with God in the remaking, redeeming, and reconciling of all things.

RECOMMENDED PRAYING

I'm living in a world that is not yet realized and I fear my prophetic imagination is too jaded to believe for what's next. I want to be a part of the restoration and remaking of all things with you, God. Be patient with me as I practice resurrection.

RECOMMENDED PLAYING

Peace, Rich Mullins



*What child is this?
The Infinite has
become a finite fact.
Everything depends
on this, or the nativity
story is just a child's
fable that no thinking
adult can believe.*

FLEMING RUTLEDGE

An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road with yellow center and edge lines, curving through a dense forest. The trees are in various stages of autumn, with some showing bright orange and yellow foliage, while others remain dark green. The road is viewed from above, creating a sense of depth and perspective.

03

WEEK THREE

AUTUMN

03

WEEK THREE

LUKE 2:8-20

Whenever I'm asked to describe the place that I'm from, I'm eager to boast about the corner we call Niagara. Nestled in the cleft of the Great Lakes, our microclimate can be described as both unique and glorious. All four seasons crash into our corner of Southern Ontario with grace and guts, showing off their splendour brilliantly and thoroughly. Our springs are wet and green, early flowers and tender buds abound. The summers are hot and humid, ripening stone fruits and beach days plentiful. The autumn is cool and colourful, finding itself at the intersection of comfort and beauty. The winters are frigid yet fun, the snowy backdrop sets the scene for Christmas trees and outdoor activities.

We are privileged here to perceive the full array of the seasons of our sphere, although to me one expression reigns supreme. The popular poet begs "wake me up when September ends!", yet I'd take that month on endless repeat. The temperatures of autumn are almost perfect in my estimation. Full length pants, layered sweaters, and closed toe shoes are my wardrobe of choice. The months are dense with harvest festivals, inspiring thanksgiving in our hearts and homes. The falltime also inaugurates a season of potential personal harvest for me, as October 1st marks the opening of legal hunting season. I spend more solitary time in the woods during autumn than I do at any other time of the year, grounding my feet, aligning my spirit, and hoping for deer. This much is true – I feel nearest to God when I'm disconnected from communication and implanted in the wilderness (often perched 15 feet up in a tree).

Of all of its glories, autumn in Ontario is adorned by a crown spectacular. The aging colours of our deciduous trees mark this season with a particular beauty. Greens dissolve into reds, yellows, and oranges, and the skyline evolves from monotone to technicolor in what seems like the blink of an eye.

The maples testify of God's goodness, the oaks proclaim his handiwork.

I like to imagine the Creator gently pulling a leaf lever in the heavens, signalling to the creation that summer is ending and the seasons are changing. Three leaf levers - marked by green, red, and yellow - each responsible for changing the colours of their respective trees.

Of course, that's not why the leaves change their colours at all. There's no man in the sky pulling levers for leaves or lives.

In fact, the reason for the metamorphosis of the trees is the same reason that white-tailed bucks run around like chickens with their heads cut off during the first week of November. The photoperiod, or the amount of daylight for every 24 hours, is responsible for the change in behaviour in both plants and animals during this time of year.

As daylight dwindles and the photoperiod decreases, the levels of testosterone in a buck increase and breeding behaviour escalates in step. Likewise, as the leaves and limbs have less access to sunlight, chlorophyll (the green pigment in leaves) production slows down until it is all destroyed. The result? The carotenoids (yellow, red, and orange pigments) and anthocyanin (blue or violet pigments) that are present in the leaves are unmasked to reveal their true colours.



There is a profundity in that paradox.

It's counterintuitive to consider that the darkness reveals what the light conceals. There's a word for that kind of thoughtfulness, and it's a way of living. The word and the way is wisdom.

It was wise of Mary from Jerusalem to awake from her sleep and attend to what an angel had to say. With sleepy eyes and quiet speech, her midnight "yes" conceived the dream of God to be one with all of us again.

It was wise of the shepherds to stay and heed instead of run and hide when angels appeared to them at night. They resisted fear and practiced faith in the dark, leading them to the birth of the saviour of the earth.

It was wise of the Magi from the Orient to study the sky, looking to the stars that shine in the darkness for insight into the inexplicable. Their attention to the darkness led them in the night to see the origin of all true light.

As the photoperiod wanes and winter looms, darkness is on the horizon. The leaves take over from Isaiah and begin to prophesy - the night is drawing upon us. Our instinct in the dark is often to cower in fear, afraid of what we cannot see. We prefer to live and walk by sight. It feels safe, we feel in control.



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*the darkness
reveals
what the light
conceals*

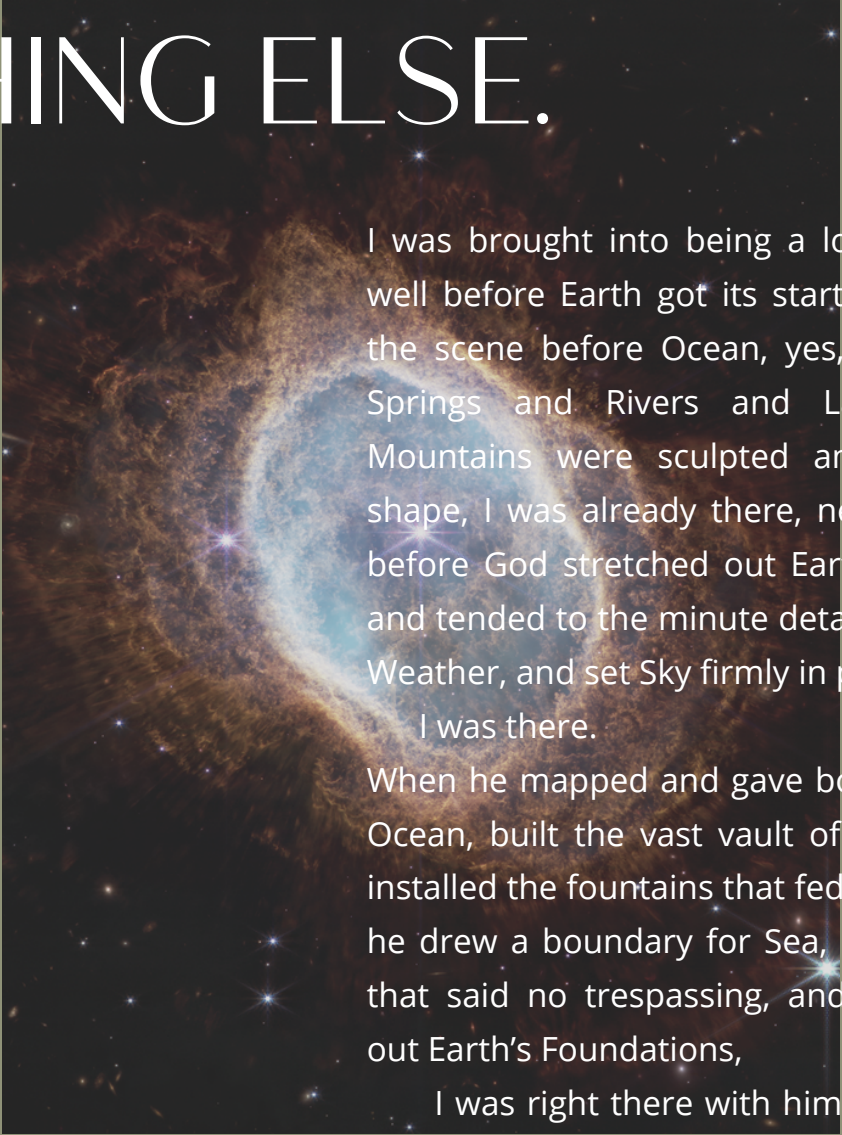
But we do our dreaming at night, the stars only shine against black, and the darkness truly reveals what the light conceals. It is the wisdom of God to look into the night and see what others cannot see.

Only a few had the wisdom to see the birth of Jesus for what it truly was.

His mother, local shepherds, and wise men from afar had eyes to see. He came in the night, in the shadow of a stable and under the darkness of a tyrannical empire. His entrance was quiet and concealed. There was no announcement or coronation for this king.

Yet one star shone in the sky, a sign that the true light was about to shine into the darkness that covered the earth, and the darkness would not be able to contain it.

GOD SOVEREIGNLY MADE ME — WISDOM — BEFORE HE DID ANYTHING ELSE.



I was brought into being a long time ago,
well before Earth got its start. I arrived on
the scene before Ocean, yes, even before
Springs and Rivers and Lakes. Before
Mountains were sculpted and Hills took
shape, I was already there, newborn; Long
before God stretched out Earth's Horizons,
and tended to the minute details of Soil and
Weather, and set Sky firmly in place,

I was there.

When he mapped and gave borders to wild
Ocean, built the vast vault of Heaven, and
installed the fountains that fed Ocean, when
he drew a boundary for Sea, posted a sign
that said no trespassing, and then staked
out Earth's Foundations,

I was right there with him, making sure
everything fit.

Day after day I was there, with my joyful
applause, always enjoying his company,
delighted with the world of things and
creatures, happily celebrating the human
family.

An aerial photograph of a winding asphalt road with yellow double lines, curving through a dense forest. The trees are in various stages of autumn, with some showing bright orange and yellow leaves, while others are still green or have turned a dark brown. The road is the central focus, leading the eye through the colorful canopy.

RECOMMENDED PRAYING

God, I admit that I'm afraid of what's in the dark. I much prefer springtime blossoms, summertime sunsets, and autumn leaves. The winter that's coming brings with it barren limbs and dormant soil. Help me to have the wisdom to see what you're doing even when I cannot see, and the faith to put one foot in front of the other.

RECOMMENDED PLAYING

[Equally Skilled](#), Jon Foreman



*Like the frost on a rose
Winter comes for us all
Oh how nature acquaints us
With the nature of patience*

SEASONS
LYRICS FROM BENJAMIN HASTINGS

04

WEEK FOUR

WINTER

04 WEEK FOUR

JOHN 1

*In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.*

*The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.*

*What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.*

*The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.*

(The prologue to John's Gospel)

In our faith community here in Niagara we have an Advent tradition of lighting five candles in subsequent order that are perched intentionally on a wreath of ever-greenery. Each week in Advent, someone from our community steps forward and reads a thematic passage from the scriptures, and then lights the corresponding candle. Five candles, each with meaningful designation. One for hope, the next for love, another for joy, and the fourth for peace. The fifth and final candle, the tallest of the five and situated in the middle, represents Christ himself.

I'd like to claim this tradition as our own, but it's far older than our congregation. The story of the Advent wreath reaches back into the 19th century and is told to have originated in an orphanage called the Rough House. "Rauhe Haus" in German, was somewhere in Hamburg and housed orphaned and neglected children under the care of a man named Johann Hinrich Wichern. Every night of Advent he would tell them stories, lead them in prayers, and light a candle to illuminate the room. Eventually a circular chandelier was retrofitted to accommodate the candles, and evergreen boughs were twisted like twine around the contraption.

It's uncertain how the tradition spread, but the Advent wreath has since been widely adopted by churches and families. The candles serve to represent the light of Jesus that has come into the world. The wreath an ancient symbol of victory, and the evergreens a motif of everlasting life.

In a pre-modern world, candles were regularly employed to bring sight to the night. Before the incandescent was invented, it was wax and wicks that drove the darkness out of rooms, homes, and hearts. I grew up in a very modern home, never needing any analog assistance to light a room. I did live in Uganda for the better part of a year however, and during that time became very well acquainted with candles and matches. Every other day the power grid gets turned off for half of that East African country, so as the sun sets the light went with it. If we wanted to eat, read, pray, or play after dark, we needed a candle and a flame to light the way.

Our scripture reading today brings us back to where we began a few weeks ago. Even before the goings on of Genesis, God was working and the genesis of a word was stirring. God was there in the beginning, in perfect fellowship with themselves.



We see the evidence of that here in John's testimony, that God was not alone in his creative action, but practicing in partnership with the Son and the Spirit also. Yet shortly after light shone on the creation and the Creator called it good, the serpent came along and things were no longer good. A curse. A casting out. Darkness

In an age of instant electricity and constant glow from technology, it can be easy to forget just how dark the winter is. It wasn't until I married a Southerner and brought her north of the border to live our first two years married in a basement apartment that I learned how influential that darkness can actually be. "I'm just feeling sad" Rebecca would say, and it took the help of some healthcare providers to learn that she was simply deficient in Vitamin D. Immigrating to a Canadian basement from a sunlit room on a lake in South Carolina turned out to be quite a disparity of exposure to daylight. Her stores of vitamins dwindled in the darkness, and her cheery spirit went along with it.

This season can be a particular challenge for anyone north of the 49th parallel, yet darkness is not contained by boundary lines or geography. The dark night of the soul comes to us all just like the seasons, cloaking our vision, hopes, and faith in shadows. Is there a light in this dark? Could it overcome even this?

To borrow on our earlier garden analogy, this truth remains - new life starts in the dark. Barbara Brown Taylor agrees, saying "Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, new life starts in the dark." The light of the world that is the origin of all created life pierced through the dark at the beginning, and has broken through the night once again, for all, in a town called Bethlehem. .



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*we wait as an act of
cultural resistance*

A star shone in the sky as a signpost to say, “the light of the world has come!” This word of God, present from the beginning, has now been made flesh, dwelling amongst us. God is incarnate, among us indeed, our hope has come.

In a sense, what we have been waiting for has already arrived. God is here. Christmas is near. Yet Advent is not a means to get to Christmas, it is the means by which we are formed into patient, contemplative Christians.

We wait as an act of cultural resistance because our metamodern world endlessly pleads us to produce. If we’re not busy, working, producing, what have we accomplished? What is our worth? The secret to the Christian life is that the Creator of the cosmos is always at work, always on the move, and always active in and through the world. Our contemplative spirit and our ability to wait enables us to perceive what he has always been up to.

He is remaking, redeeming, and reconciling all things and all people to himself. This is the good news, and the glory of Christmastime.

RECOMMENDED PRAYING

The darkness is here with a wintery chill, but we feel that we are not alone. You're feeling close, we can sense you drawing near, and our hearts are expectant of what you're about to birth. God, we're looking to you.

RECOMMENDED PLAYING

Seasons, Benjamin Hastings

MAGNIFICAT MAGNIFICAT



*“With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
In the depths of who I am I rejoice
in God my saviour.”*

With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my saviour. He has looked with favour on the low status of his servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favoured because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honours him as God. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever.

THE SONG OF MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD



*He has remembered
his mercy, just as
he promised.*

NO VACANCY

CHRISTMAS EVE

A READING FROM THE GOSPEL

At that time a decree was issued by Augustus Caesar: a census was to be taken of the whole world. (This was the first census, before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) So everyone set off to be registered, each to their own town. Joseph too, who belonged to the house and family of David, went from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea, David's city, to be registered with his fiancée Mary, who was pregnant.

So that's where they were when the time came for her to have her baby; and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him up and put him to rest in a feeding-trough, because there was no room for them in the normal living quarters. There were shepherds in that region, out in the open, keeping a night watch around their flock. An angel of the Lord stood in front of them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

"Don't be afraid," the angel said to them. "Look: I've got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy. Today a saviour has been born for you – the Messiah, the Lord! – in David's town. This will be the sign for you: you'll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough."

Suddenly, with the angel, there was a crowd of the heavenly armies. They were praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace upon earth among those in his favour."

So when the angels had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Well then; let's go to Bethlehem and see what it's all about, all this that the Lord has told us."

So they hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the feeding-trough. When they saw it, they told them what had been said to them about this child. And all the people who heard it were amazed at the things the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured all these things and mused over them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.



A BLESSING

FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

Oh God, how we've longed for you to come. We must admit, we haven't been entirely faithful in our waiting. We have submitted our spirits to the pace of the planet; rushing on the roads, impatient at the cash register, and anxious in our hearts. Forgive us for our failures to rest.

Yet, we are here and so are you. Regardless of how we stumbled through this Advent, we have arrived here at the same time as you. God, we believe that you are with us. You are gracious and you are kind, you are patient and you are present.

Guide us in your grace through these next 24 hours and also through the days to come to see the evidence of your incarnation in songs, meals, and prayers. Cause us to hear your lovingkindness in the morning and the echos of your mercy in the evening. Remind us by blossoms or sunsets, leaves or snowfall that you love our world and everything in it. Your adoration for this creation drew you to step inside it and become just like us.

Blessed are we who
live our lives fully embodied,
not afraid of what could come
because we know that we are not alone.

You are here, this we know. You will come again, this we confess. Be patient with us as we practice our own patience in the messy middle.

Alleluia!
The light of the world has come.
Alleluia!
The night of the world is done.

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DECEMBER 26TH CHRISTMASTIDE

Merry Christmas! Yes, it's still Christmas. Although the world has turned off the Christmas lights and carols today and exchanged them for fluorescents that make way for door crashing sales, the Christian tradition of celebrating Christmas is just getting started. The sacred calendar that begins the year in Advent gives the next twelve days to revelling in the light that has come. It's only fitting, we've spent all these weeks waiting and watching, it's not enough to have our celebration come and go in just a day. God has come, we have seen Immanuel, and that deserves prolonged merrymaking. This deserves a feast!

This is congruent with the counter cultural spirit of Advent and the prophetic resistance of a sacred calendar. The secular system of a consumerist Christmas makes it hard to imagine what twelve days of Christmas could even look like. You may be feeling anxious at the thought of extending these holidays.

In sympathy of this, allow me to offer a few rhythms that may help you enjoy a weeks-long Christmas feast as opposed to a 24-hour frenzy.

Keep your decorations (and especially your Christmas tree) up and shining through January 6th. If you pick a live tree like we do, this takes a little bit of foresight. First, you have to buy it late enough to give it the best chance at surviving. The third week of November is usually the sweet spot for us. Second, make sure to cut off an inch or two off the trunk after you buy it. That will enable it to gobble up all the water you give it. And third, speaking of water, you have to be disciplined with your watering. Don't let it dry out!

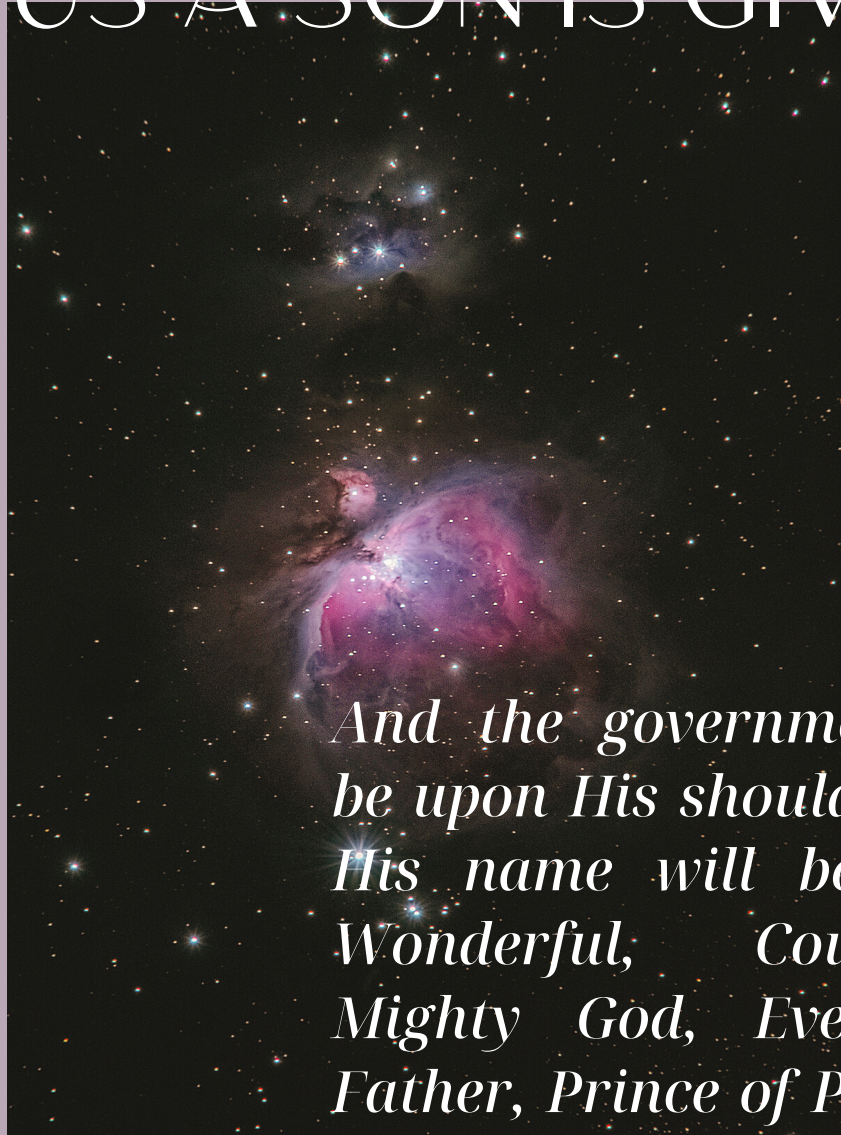
If you have kids, consider opening your presents daily throughout the twelve days of Christmas as opposed to opening them all on the 25th. The benefit of this is twofold; first, it helps to avoid the chaos and clamour of a modern Christmas morning. Instead of your living room looking like a trash heap, the scene with less gifts is sure to be more serene. Secondly, it's a practical way to extend the celebration of Christmas throughout the entire two week season. Each day has a little gift and glory to look forward to, reminding the whole family that we are still celebrating.

Now if you're reading this in sequence, it's December 26th. All of your gifts are open, you're digging yourself out from under the strewn paper, and you're wishing you would've received these recommendations earlier. Don't worry, there's always next year.

Yet there's still something you can do! Of all of these recommendations, here's the most accessible - keep your Christmas lights shining and your candles burning. Lighting a nightly candle is a small and simple tradition that is rich with meaning and significance. It's a little act of resistance, a little glimmer of hope, and a little reminder that the light of the world has come. Light one tonight!

With that, I hope you feel more equipped to embrace this Christmas and extend this season beyond how you normally celebrate. In giving the next two weeks to intentionally observe a longer Christmas, you are embodying a counter cultural rhythm of life that can have measurable effects - both in your hearts, homes, and broader communities. So here's to the Christmas season. Let us eat, drink, and be merry!

UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN
UNTO US A SON IS GIVEN



*And the government will
be upon His shoulder. And
His name will be called
Wonderful, Counsellor,
Mighty God, Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace. Of
the increase of His
government and peace
there will be no end.*

ISAIAH 9

06 JANUARY 6TH

MATTHEW 2

Here we are. The day after the final day of Christmas; the end of one season and the beginning of the next. It's my hope that over the last few weeks and throughout this Advent time you have had the opportunity to ponder the seasonality of life, the presence of God, and the way that Christians ought to move through the world. Today on this final bid to Christmas we must consider one last thing - where do we go from here?

On the sacred calendar this day has a name, Epiphany. Just like Christmas, Pentecost, or Easter, this singular day in our sacred rhythm is traditionally observed by feasting and celebration. In New Orleans, our southern family will celebrate this day by enjoying a King Cake - a ring of twisted cinnamon roll-style dough, adorned in multicolours, and a small plastic baby hidden within. In Argentina, children will put their shoes by the door overnight along with grass and water for imaginary camels. In the morning they'll rush outside to see if anyone has left any gifts. In our home, we'll acknowledge this day by taking down our decorations, turning our Christmas playlist off, and reading Matthew 2:1-12.

Epiphany means manifestation, revelation, or appearance. This day commemorates the visit of the Magi to the Christ-child as recorded in the second chapter of Matthew. The Magi are often centre stage in nativity sets and even the subject of their own carols, but in the nativity story according to the gospels they play a minor role. Matthew happens to be the only gospel writer to even make mention of them. In our songs and sets we claim there to be three of them, but Matthew never mentions their number. We've gleaned there to be a trio by the number of gifts they present the Christ-child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These three gifts, unlike the plastic and polyester that we habitually trade at Christmastime, were rich in both value and meaning. Ultimately, they were a sign and confirmation that through this birth many prophecies had been fulfilled.

The first gift, an offering of gold. Customary for royal visits, in the giving of gold these men affirmed that the baby they visited was a king. The next gift, a presentation of frankincense. Traditionally burned as incense for ceremonial worship, this sweet smelling aroma serves to say that this visit was an act of worship. This child is divine. Third, and a bit curiously, myrrh. A fragrant spice from native trees, myrrh was widely used as a key ingredient for the preparation of bodies for burial.


Although men of great wisdom as we've already established, these three kings likely had no cerebral intent to fulfill the Isaiahic prophecies. Likely from Persia, the Magi were not Jewish nor students of the scriptures. They studied the sky, looking and longing for meaning and mission. A confluence of stars brought them to Bethlehem, and in their coming they fulfilled the vision of a world to come. The Epiphany, the truth revealed to the Magi is this - Christ has come not only to the Jews, but to the Gentiles. That is to say, Christ has been revealed as the saviour of the world. Nothing that is created in the cosmos is beyond the scope of his saving reach and their gifts confess this to be true. Jesus was born to be the king of the world, he lived and died and was buried.

In Isaiah 60 the prophet foretold of the Messiah that “nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Indeed, the light of men drew many to himself, and of those many were a handful of kings from the East.

The seed of God was planted in a woman from Nazareth. The root of Jesse sprouted in the city of David. God was born in and amongst the Jews, but his presence is a gift that is given to all. The Christ has come to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, free and enslaved. He is born to save the saint and the sinner, the powerful and the powerless, the orphan and the widow.

Only through the lens and by the light of Jesus can we see that Isaiah foretold a messiah for the whole world. By this we now know that salvation has come in Jesus, and through him all the world will be saved. He is remaking, restoring, and reconciling all things. Lions are lying with lambs and weapons of war are being beaten into garden tools. Peace has come, and the increase of peace will know no end. This is the world we’re living in, and this is how we move forward from here. One step at a time, walking in the light of God, and growing in the grace and knowledge of him. By the revelation of God given to us in Jesus Christ, all shall be well. All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Alexander Mills

A photograph of a dirt road winding through a grassy field under a clear sky. The road is in the foreground, leading towards a distant horizon. The grass is dry and yellowish-brown. The sky is a pale, clear blue. The text is overlaid on the image, centered and in a white, serif font. A large, faint, stylized quotation mark is visible behind the text.

*For outlandish creatures like us,
on our way to a heart, a brain,
and courage, Bethlehem is not the
end of our journey but only the
beginning – not home but the place
through which we must pass if
ever we are to reach home at last.*

FREDERICK BUECHNER