WAKE-UP CALL

Behold

Shelbi Shutt

An Advent Invitation to Slow Down and See Again

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SEEDBED

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Attention is the beginning of devotion.

—Mary Oliver

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An Invitation to Awakening

This resource comes with an invitation.

The invitation is as simple as it is comprehensive. It is not an invitation to commit your life to this or that cause or to join an organization or to purchase another book. The invitation is this: to wake up to the life you always hoped was possible and the reason you were put on planet Earth.

It begins with following Jesus Christ. In case you are unaware, Jesus was born in the first century BC into a poor family from Nazareth, a small village located in what is modern-day Israel. While his birth was associated with extraordinary phenomena, we know little about his childhood. At approximately thirty years of age, Jesus began a public mission of preaching, teaching, and healing throughout the region known as Galilee.

His mission was characterized by miraculous signs and wonders, extravagant care of the poor and marginalized, and multiple unconventional claims about his own identity and purpose. In short, he claimed to be the incarnate Son of God with the mission and power to save people from sin, deliver them from death, and bring them into the now and eternal kingdom of God—on earth as it is in heaven.

In the spring of his thirty-third year, during the Jewish Passover celebration, Jesus was arrested by the religious authorities, put on trial in the middle of the night, and, at their urging, sentenced to death by a Roman governor. On the day known to history as Good Friday, Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. On the following Sunday, according to multiple eyewitness accounts, he was physically raised from the dead. He appeared to hundreds of people, taught his disciples, and prepared for what was to come.

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended bodily into the heavens where, according to the Bible, he sits at the right hand of God, as the Lord of heaven and earth. Ten days after his ascension, in a gathering of 120 people on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish day of celebration, something truly extraordinary happened. A loud and powerful wind swept over the people gathered. Pillars of what appeared to be fire descended upon the followers of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the presence and power of God, filled the people, and the church was born. After this, the followers of Jesus went forth and began to do the very things Jesus did—preaching, teaching, and

healing—planting churches and making disciples all over the world. Today, more than two thousand years later, the movement has reached us. This is the Great Awakening and it has never stopped.

Yes, two thousand years hence and more than two billion followers of Jesus later, this awakening movement of Jesus Christ and his church stands stronger than ever. Billions of ordinary people the world over have discovered in Jesus Christ an awakened life they never imagined possible. They have overcome challenges, defeated addictions, endured untenable hardships and suffering with unexplainable joy, and stared death in the face with the joyful confidence of eternal life. They have healed the sick, gathered the outcasts, embraced the oppressed, loved the poor, contended for justice, labored for peace, cared for the dying, and, yes, even raised the dead.

We all face many challenges and problems. They are deeply personal, yet when joined together, they create enormous and complex chaos in the world, from our hearts to our homes to our churches and our cities. All of this chaos traces to two originating problems: sin and death. Sin, far beyond mere moral failure, describes the fundamental broken condition of every human being. Sin separates us from God and others, distorts and destroys our deepest identity as the image-bearers of God, and poses a fatal problem from which we cannot save ourselves. It results in an ever-diminishing quality of life and ultimately ends in eternal death. Because Jesus lived a life of sinless perfection, he is able to save us from sin and restore us to a right relationship with God,

others, and ourselves. He did this through his sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf. Because Jesus rose from the dead, he is able to deliver us from death and bring us into a quality of life both eternal and unending.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ: pardon from the penalty of sin, freedom from the power of sin, deliverance from the grip of death, and awakening to the supernatural empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live powerfully for the good of others and the glory of God. Jesus asks only that we acknowledge our broken selves as failed sinners, trust him as our Savior, and follow him as our Lord. Following Jesus does not mean an easy life; however, it does lead to a life of power and purpose, joy in the face of suffering, and profound, even world-changing, love for God and people.

All of this is admittedly a lot to take in. Remember, this is an invitation. Will you follow Jesus? Don't let the failings of his followers deter you. Come and see for yourself.

Here's a prayer to get you started:

> Our Father in heaven, it's me (say your name). I want to know you. I want to live an awakened life. I confess I am a sinner. I have failed myself, others, and you in many ways. I know you made me for a purpose and I want to fulfill that purpose with my one life. I want to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus, thank you for the gift of your life and death and resurrection and ascension on my behalf. I want to walk in relationship with

> you as Savior and Lord. Would you lead me into the fullness and newness of life I was made for? I am ready to follow you. Come, Holy Spirit, and fill me with the love, power, and purposes of God. I pray these things by faith in the name of Jesus, amen.

It would be our privilege to help you get started and grow deeper in this awakened life of following Jesus. For some next steps and encouragements visit seedbed.com/awaken.

"I never *knew* Jesus
like this!
I just knew about him."

—from a real Wake-Up Call Reader

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Introduction

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

—Marcel Proust

Familiarity breeds contempt.

—Ancient proverb

"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?" (Matt. 13:55-56).

This is how the people of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, responded when He made the audacious claim to be God's Anointed One. And in their familiarity, they missed Him.

Familiarity has a way of doing that. Assuming it already knows, familiarity dulls our attention, encrusts our

hearts with apathy, and quietly replaces awe with autopilot—leaving us susceptible to miss God, even when He is near.

For those of us who have grown up around the stories of Jesus, this temptation runs deep, especially around Christmastime. We know the songs. We know how the story goes. And so, without realizing it, we can move through Advent on default mode—reciting truths while rushing past their wonder, limiting our capacity to receive what's on offer in this season.

I don't know about you, but year after year, Advent seems to come and go faster than I anticipate. Just as I'm trying to slow down and make the most of it all, everything around me seems to pick up speed. And if I'm not careful, familiarity paired with the hurried pace of this season—always pulling me toward excess and urgency—can take over, causing me to miss the invitation it holds before me.

And what is that invitation?

In a word—*behold*.

To slow down long enough that we might begin to see again.

Beholding is the antidote to hurry and familiarity. It retrains our attention and opens us up to receive the gift of God's presence afresh.

In the birth narratives of Jesus, *behold* functions as a biblical way of saying:

Stop.

Pay attention.

This changes everything.

"*Behold*, you will conceive in your womb" (Luke 1:31 ESV, italics added).

"*Behold*, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son" (Luke 1:36 ESV, italics added).

"*Behold*, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44 ESV, italics added).

"Fear not, for *behold*, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10 ESV, italics added).

"*Behold*, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34 ESV, italics added).

This little word heralds the moments where heaven touches earth. And its invitation?

No, scratch that—its command?

Our undivided attention.

Creating daily time and space to marvel and meditate on the fulfillment of Christ's first advent and the promise of His second is an age-old tradition that serves to anchor the mind and awaken the soul to the truth. And by *truth* I'm not talking about a set of doctrinal statements to

believe—good and necessary as those are—but a person to encounter.

Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)—offering Himself as the true source of our souls' satisfaction and security.

So if you find yourself entering this Advent season feeling a bit lost, confused, empty, or just longing for more, take heart. Jesus's arrival is good news of great joy for *all* people. And by *all*, that means *you*.

There is so much more of God's goodness available to us than our hurried lives tend to make room for. And my hope is that these pages serve as a companion, helping you slow down long enough to behold Jesus and awaken afresh to the wonder of God with us.

How to Use This Book

As we enter Advent together, these devotions are designed to encourage your heart and increase your capacity to behold and encounter Jesus through silence, Scripture, reflection, and prayer.

The first section invites us to behold Jesus as *the way*, attuning our hearts to His presence and learning to walk at His pace. The second calls us to behold Jesus as *the truth*, allowing His light to clarify what is real, lead us to name our longings honestly, and steady us amid uncertainty. The third section leads us to behold Jesus as *the life*—our source of joy, hope, and renewal as we wait for all things to be made new. And, finally, as we enter the final week before Christmas, the fourth section invites us to behold Jesus as Immanuel—God with us—the breathtaking mystery that the Creator of the universe refuses to remain at a distance, speaking hope into our deepest ache and assuring us that even in loneliness, grief, and waiting, we are not abandoned.

Each devotion begins and ends with two minutes of silence and stillness. In a world saturated with more Christian podcasts, books, and courses than we've ever had, I think it's fair to say that we don't have a content problem; we have a formation problem—one that can only be addressed through presence, practice, and attentiveness to God. Silence and stillness are how we heed the psalmist's words to "be still, and know that I am God" (46:10). This is how we enter into awareness of God's presence and abide in His love.

But this is not easy.

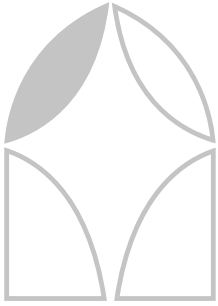
When we slow down, the internal noise and external distractions we've learned to avoid begin to surface. Restlessness, discomfort, unanswered questions, and even buried emotions can make stillness feel discouraging or unproductive. When this happens, don't give up. As Pete Scazzero warns: "If we fail to learn how to be quiet in God's presence—to stop talking long enough and routinely enough to listen—how will we mature into Christian adults? How will our relationship with God develop any depth?"[1] So press in and remember that these moments are not about getting it right or having a powerful experience. They are an act of trust. A quiet declaration that God is already at work and your identity is secure in Him, even when nothing feels obvious or impressive. This is the space where we stop striving,

1. Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day: A 40-Day Journey with the Daily Office* (Zondervan, 2014), 13–14.

stop managing outcomes, and stop performing for God—and instead allow ourselves to be with Him. Over time, this practice does its slow, deep work, reforming our inner lives, retraining our attention, and reordering our loves.

Part I

Beholding Jesus: The Way



December 1

The Way of Attention

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
"I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness."
—ISAIAH 42:1–7 ESV

CONSIDER THIS

This past summer, my husband and I went out to explore a new part of the city we now call home. As we made our way down the pier at dusk, I found myself completely captivated by the New York City skyline lighting up the night sky. Stacked like Legos beside one another, the buildings wrapped around us, pulling my gaze upward.

As we took in the scenery, I failed to notice that the sidewalk was slowly narrowing. With my eyes up, I didn't see the break forming below, and, before I knew it, my wheelchair started to tip sideways. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late.

Don't worry—I didn't completely tip over. I just crash-landed off the side of the six-inch curb. After regaining my bearings, we went on with the rest of our evening,

but I've yet to move on from what that seemingly inconsequential moment taught me: We don't just move with our feet. We move with our attention.

When our eyes are fixed on something, our whole lives begin to follow.

Isaiah's prophetic announcement of the promised servant begins with a single word: *Behold*.

In Hebrew, this word is less command and more emphatic interjection. It's meant to shift the momentum and arrest our attention. It's a way of saying, "Hey! Slow down, lean in, don't miss this!"

And what is it that Isaiah wants us to see?

Just prior to today's scripture, the prophet said, "Behold, they are all a delusion; their words are nothing; their metal images are empty wind" (Isa. 41:29 ESV). "Behold, my servant," then, offers a contrast. Isaiah is trying to help us see how the promised Messiah is wholly unlike the false gods Israel found themselves turning to in exile.

Israel's exile to Babylon is a mirror of the human condition. We are all, in some way, exiles longing for home. And when the longings of our life go unmet, when suffering persists, when injustice lingers unresolved, our vision can blur, cultivating a spirit of rebellion and idolatry in us, just like it did in the Israelites.

Fixing our eyes on the content of our circumstances rather than the character of the one who promises to

be with us distorts our sense of direction, and before we know it, we realize we're drifting toward disaster.

Behold my servant . . .

The unfurling hope of Advent begins here.

To behold Jesus—the servant who walks the way of humble faithfulness, who moves toward suffering rather than away from it, who will not abandon justice even when the road is long—is to have our hope restored.

This Advent, before we rush ahead, we are invited to stop. To pay attention to what we are paying attention to. And to behold the one who shows us the way.

PRAYER

Jesus, slow me down to the speed of love. Reorient my attention when it drifts. Holy Spirit, teach me to behold You again and to walk in Your way of faithful love. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Take a moment to notice what's been occupying your attention most. What thoughts, worries, or joys have been holding your focus?
- Allow these preoccupations to lead you into curiosity with the Lord. Tell Him what's been occupying your mind's attention or your heart's affection. And then create some space to listen. Ask Him: "What is it You want me to see? What is it You want me to know?"

December 2

The Way of Waiting

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.
—PSALM 130

CONSIDER THIS

Waiting is a main character in the Christmas story.

Scratch that.

Waiting is a main character in the *entire* story of the Bible.

Between the warning and the first drops of flood rain, Noah waited 120 years.

Between the promise and the arrival of their son, Issac, Abraham and Sarah waited twenty-five years.

Between his dreams and their fulfillment, Joseph waited thirteen years.

Between the onset of Pharaoh's oppressive rule and their rescue out of slavery, the Israelites waited four hundred years.

Between their exodus from Egypt and their entrance into the promised land, the Israelites waited forty *more* years.

Between his anointing and his appointment as king, David waited twenty-two years.

Between Malachi and Matthew, God's people waited four hundred years for the Lord to break His silence.

Between decades of barrenness and the birth of John the Baptist, Elizabeth waited most of her life.

Between His birth and the start of His public ministry, Jesus waited thirty years.

Waiting is not the exception in the Bible; it's the norm.

Many of us, especially during the holidays, feel the weight of this waiting bearing down on us, threatening to crush us along with the desires we hold (often with clenched fists) before God in prayer.

Psalm 130 is a song of pilgrimage. As God's people journeyed up toward the mountain of the Lord, where His presence dwelled, this heart-cry welling up from the depths of their souls spilled out into song:

> *I wait for the Lord*
> *more than watchmen wait for the morning,*
> *more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

In the ancient Near East, watchmen pulling the night shift were stationed on city walls through the darkest, most vulnerable hours of the night, guarding against enemies and looking for signs of danger. The light of morning was the first sign of safety and relief, but no

matter how bad he wants the night to end, a watchman cannot rush the dawn.

The image of a watchman is a reminder to stay awake in the waiting—to resist distractions and fight the urge to fall asleep.

In the final hours of His life, deep in the night, Jesus goes to Gethsemane to pray and asks His disciples to keep watch with Him. But in the hour of His greatest need and deepest grief, His disciples fall asleep.

When faced with sorrow or long-suffering, we, too, are tempted to fall asleep. We tend to distract our way through waiting in hopes of dulling the discomfort.

Jesus is looking for disciples who will keep watch with Him, who will bear up under dark nights of the soul with a resolve to wait like a watchman.

Advent reminds us that waiting is the crucible of formation. As we behold Jesus while we wait, just as Jesus beheld the Father in the garden, we can trust that resurrection life will break through the darkness of death and despair.

The watchman stays awake not out of anxiety but out of confidence—light *will* break into the darkness.

PRAYER

Jesus, You are well acquainted with long nights of waiting. Thank You for keeping watch when I couldn't. Teach me to wait like a watchman—not with clenched fists or restless

worry but with steady trust that light will come. Because of Your steadfast love, Lord, I can wait without fear. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- What are you waiting for right now—something you've been praying for, hoping for, or holding with clenched hands?
- When the waiting gets heavy, how are you most tempted to fall asleep (distraction, busyness, numbing, control, cynicism, resignation)?
- Picture yourself standing watch in the dark, eyes fixed on the horizon. What does it feel like to wait not with anxiety but with expectation? Ask God what it would look like for you to stay awake in this season.



The Way of Greatness

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."
—Luke 1:30-33

CONSIDER THIS

No one sets out to live a mediocre life. The desire to be great is deep within us all. And this desire is clearly reflected in our cultural obsession with greatness. We name it, celebrate it, and even build our lives around it.

Alexander wasn't "Alexander the All Right"; he was "Alexander the Great."

Muhammad Ali was famously nicknamed "The Greatest."

Wayne Gretzky is affectionately referred to as Wayne "the Great One" Gretzky.

The impulse to be recognized and revered lives in all of us and, if left unchecked, will slowly shape the quiet motivations of our own hearts.

"He will be great."

This is how the angel describes Mary's soon-to-be son. And while this is good news for many, it is also a threat.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus's birth is framed by the rule of another man called "great": Herod (you guessed it) the Great. A terribly violent man who embodied the Greco-Roman vision of greatness marked by rank, glory, honor, and prestige.

When Herod heard the news of Jesus's arrival, "he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matt. 2:3).

What was so troubling about the birth of a helpless baby, especially for a man who ruled with the full force of the Roman Empire behind him? Herod's response exposes the fragility of his greatness. Greatness rooted in fear can never rest; it must always defend itself.

Beneath the soft glow of manger scenes and tender images of baby Jesus is the reality that His coming disrupts every way of life built on fear, domination, and self-interest.

One way to read the Christmas story is as a clash of competing kingdoms that calls us to carefully consider our own vision of greatness.

Herod's vision of greatness was built on strength, strategy, and control. It was dependent on intimidation and the preservation of power at all costs (which for him included the murder of his own wife and three of his children). Jesus's life models a completely different vision. Entering the world as a dependent, helpless baby, He refuses to demand allegiance or wield His power to harm those who have none.

The contrast could not be sharper. While the world chases greatness by climbing higher, Jesus reveals a greatness that moves in the opposite direction: He goes low.

When the disciples later argued about who would be the greatest, Jesus, pointing to a child, explained that unless they learned to receive the kingdom like that child—trusting, dependent, open—they would miss it altogether.

In Jesus's kingdom, greatness is measured not by how high we rise but by how freely we surrender.

Advent reminds us that the Greatest One did not cling to His status but chose the path of self-giving love even unto death. He entered our world not to dominate but to dwell with us. Not to be served but to serve. And in doing so, He redefines greatness for us all.

PRAYER

Jesus, You are the Great One. Holy Spirit, align my vision of greatness with the way of Jesus. Teach me the downward way that leads to life and awaken childlike trust in my heart afresh today. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where do you notice fear or insecurity influencing the way you pursue significance, recognition, or success?
- Engaging your sanctified imagination, picture a child. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight the specific aspects of a child that will help you more fully embody Jesus's vision of greatness. Maybe it's the delight they find in small, ordinary things, or the way they readily rely on others for care and guidance, or the way they ask questions without fear of looking silly.
- What is one small, concrete way you can practice Jesus's downward way of greatness?

December 4

The Way of Dependence

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
—Philippians 2:5-11

CONSIDER THIS

At my first doctor's appointment after being diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy—a rare neuromuscular disease that progressively weakens the muscles in my arms and legs—the doctor looked me straight in the eye and said, "There will come a day when either you will choose the chair, or the chair will choose you."

Ten years later, as the growing risk of falling began to impact everyday life, his words echoed in my mind. I knew other patients who, despite their fragile frame, clung to every last measure of their mobility, as if life in a wheelchair were the end of life itself. And in trying to avoid the chair, they fell—hard—often breaking something in the process. What they fought to escape eventually overtook them. The chair chose them.

When I found myself standing at that same crossroads, the thought of using a mobility aid felt like giving up. And, in a way, it was. But, to my surprise, as I accepted the chair, giving up turned out to be way more like

getting free. Free from the illusion of self-sufficiency I didn't even know I was stuck in.

Jesus, being made in human likeness, emptied Himself. He willingly embraced the vulnerability of dependence.

In other words, He chose the chair.

The incarnation of Christ subverts our culture's idolization of independence and reveals the true way to freedom. By embracing a life of daily dependence upon the Spirit and obedience to the Father, even unto death, Jesus made a way for us to experience the ultimate freedom we long for—freedom from sin and shame so we can follow the way of Jesus and live in the fullness of His love.

The first time I went out in my power chair was on a walk through downtown Portland with my husband. I remember reaching for his hand, and as I held it, tears began to stream down my face. Holding hands felt different—awkward, unfamiliar.

Embracing the way of dependence is a lot like that—awkward and unfamiliar. But just as the chair has given me access to a life I could not live on my own, choosing the way of dependence frees us to live more fully than self-sufficiency ever could.

PRAYER

Jesus, thank You that You did not consider equality with God something to be used for Your own advantage but instead chose to humble Yourself. Because You embraced

the way of dependence, I can know life—and life to the full. I confess how tightly I hold to self-sufficiency, how afraid I am to need help, to slow down, to be carried. Holy Spirit, help me receive the gift of my limitations and trust You in the awkward, unfamiliar places. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where in your life do you find yourself resisting dependence—on God or on others—and what do you fear you might lose if you let go? Take a moment to bring your honest feelings before God in prayer.
- As you picture Jesus choosing dependence, what stands out to you?
- What greater freedom might be waiting for you on the other side of choosing the chair? Ask Jesus to bring to mind what life to the full could look like as you embrace dependence.

December 5

The Way of Surrender

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called

the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.
—Luke 1:26-38

CONSIDER THIS

Don't rush past this part of the story. I know, I know, you've probably heard it before, but take a moment to put yourself in Mary's shoes. She had plenty of reasons to be anxious and afraid. The news of her miraculous conception simultaneously exposed her to severe danger and excruciating social shame.

In that day and age, a woman's honor was closely tied to her sexual purity. Getting pregnant outside of marriage did more than rev up the rumor mill; it brought public disgrace upon both her and her family. From this moment on, Mary would endure endless murmurs of suspicion and the threat of lifelong marginalization.

The implications of this "good news" didn't stop there. Mary also faced the very real threat of physical harm. Under the law, it was well within Joseph's legal right to have Mary stoned or, at the very least, to divorce her, which he had every intention of doing before the angel appeared to him in a dream. Beyond exposing her to the threat of violence, saying yes would place Mary in profound economic vulnerability, as she risked the loss of protection, provision, and the stability a husband and family provided in the ancient world.

There was a lot on the line for her, *but* she said yes anyway.

How?

That's what I want to know.

How do we become the kind of people who, in the face of danger, discomfort, and loss, say yes to what God is inviting us into anyway? How do we let go of what we think we need to feel safe and secure in order to lay hold of the more God has on offer?

I don't think there's an easy answer to this question or a shortcut that lets us bypass the cost. But I do think that Mary's interaction with the angel shows us something about how we might begin to embrace the way of surrender.

Notice that her surrender comes right on the heels of the angel saying, "For no word from God will ever fail."

Read that again.

For no word from God will ever fail.

The angel didn't promise that if Mary said yes, she would be free from suffering, as if, in saying yes, all that other stuff would just go away. In fact, in the very next chapter God tells her through Simeon that being Jesus's mom will feel like "a sword [that] will pierce [her] soul" (Luke 2:35).

For Mary, her faith in God to make good on His word was *stronger* than the fear of losing her life.

And to follow Jesus in the way of surrender, the same must be true for us.

Conviction must be stronger than cultural pressure.

Loyalty to Jesus must be stronger than compromise.

Faithfulness must be stronger than comfort.

Hunger for God must be stronger than apathy.

In order to release our grip on what we think is best, our vision of God's goodness must become stronger. And I believe that, slowly over time, as we call to mind and meditate on the faithfulness of God throughout the story of Scripture and the story of our very lives, we, too, can cultivate a "this must be stronger than that" kind of life.[2]

May Mary's example awaken fresh courage in us to trust that God's word is stronger than our fear.

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2. Jon Tyson, *Beautiful Resistance: The Joy of Conviction in a Culture of Compromise* (Multnomah, 2020), 3.

PRAYER

Jesus, You promise that whoever seeks to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Your sake will find it. Holy Spirit, bring to mind the faithfulness of God written across Scripture and woven throughout our own stories. Jesus, we say You are worthy of our whole lives. Increase our capacity to see Your goodness and behold Your worthiness until surrender becomes our joyful response. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Take a moment to write down what saying yes to Jesus might cost you. Then honestly consider the cost of saying no. What might be lost, diminished, or delayed if you choose to hold on instead of surrender?
- Now take a moment to behold Jesus on the cross. Consider the life you are invited into because He willingly laid down His. Allow His surrender to recalibrate your own.
- Call to mind one promise from God's Word or a testimony of His faithfulness in your life. Write it down and put it somewhere you'll see it throughout the rest of this Advent season, letting it strengthen your courage to say yes.



The Way of Love

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.
—John 3:14-17

CONSIDER THIS

Just before we read what is, arguably, the most famous verse in all of Scripture, Jesus reaches into the archives of Israel's history to highlight a story: the story of God miraculously saving His people from poisonous snakes.

In the wilderness, the Israelites grew impatient and began speaking directly against God and Moses in accusation and distrust, interpreting their suffering as evidence that God had abandoned them. In response, snakes came crawling into camp and started biting them. Some died, and the rest, as the lifeblood slowly drained from their bodies, cried out in desperation, confessing their sin and begging for rescue. The text tells us that the snakes stuck around, but God, in His mercy, made a (strange) way for them to be saved. He instructed Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole, promising that whoever looked at it would receive new life.

Like the Israelites, we often speak to God—and about God—in ways that reveal our distrust, secretly accusing Him of withholding what we think we need or deserve or assuming that the presence of pain means the absence of His presence. But God, in his mercy and kindness, enters into our brokenness to make a way for us to look and live.

In connecting this story to Himself, Jesus pulls this Old Testament illustration into the present to show us that God does not leave His people in the wilderness of their sin and shame.

The cross, upon which His very body was lifted up, becomes the place where the poison of sin and the burden of shame find healing—where death gives way to new life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Don't let your familiarity with this verse rob you of its wonder.

The advent of Christ was birthed out of the Father's self-giving love for the world.

Some scholars suggest that a more accurate translation of this verse is "For God loved the world *in this way*: He gave his one and only Son." This is not a vague or sentimental love; it has a shape, a direction, a cost. God loved the world by giving, by moving toward us, by lifting His Son in the very place where sin and death once reigned.

Just as the Israelites were not healed by their confession alone but by lifting their eyes toward what God had raised up, we are not saved by mere words or religious effort. We are saved by beholding. By trusting. By believing that Christ's death on the cross, the clearest picture of God's love, is sufficient to save us.

In John's gospel, to believe is not merely to agree; it's to receive, to place the full weight of our lives on what God has given. And so the Christian life becomes a practice of beholding—learning, day by day, to keep our eyes fixed

on the love that has already claimed us, and allowing our lives to become a response to what we see.

PRAYER

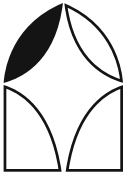
Father, thank You for loving the world—not after we did more or tried hard to clean ourselves up, as if we ever could. Oh, the depth of Your love. May I never lose sight of its wonder. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Confessing and repenting from our sin increases our capacity to receive the Father's love. Remembering that it's the Lord's kindness that leads us to repentance, take a moment to invite the Holy Spirit to search your heart, convicting you of any sin that might be in your life. As things come to mind, write them down.
- Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When you're ready, release the things your wrote down to God by praying aloud, tearing up the paper, or placing it somewhere out of sight. Let this act be a reminder that forgiveness is received, not earned.

Part I
Conversation
Guide



Beholding Jesus: The Way

Focus Entries: #2 & #5
Focus Verses: Psalm 130; Luke 1:26-38
Theme Verse: *"I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope."* —Psalm 130:5

DISCUSSION

1. In day 2, Shelbi writes, "Advent reminds us that waiting is the crucible of formation." How does God use times of waiting to shape us? How can our attempts to numb the discomfort of waiting interfere with this process?
2. Mary said yes to God even though she knew her obedience would come with a cost. How can we cultivate the courage to release our sense of control over our own lives and accept God's leading? When you're faced with relinquishing control, do you think about only what surrendering will cost you, or do you also consider what it will cost yourself and others if you don't?

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Gabriel told Mary that "no word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:37). How have you found God's Word dependable in your own life? How can recalling God's faithfulness in keeping His promises embolden us to trust Him when we are confronted with uncertainty?

2. Waiting is a key theme in the story of God's people. We see this throughout the Bible in the stories of people like Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, David, Elizabeth, and even Jesus. How is waiting foundational to our identity as God's people? Why do you think God allows—or even leads—His people into seasons of waiting, especially when we long for quick answers?

3. In day 5, Shelbi writes, "In order to release our grip on what we think is best, our vision of God's goodness must become stronger." We've struggled to fully trust God's goodness since the garden, when we entertained the serpent's lie that God was withholding something good from humanity (Gen. 3:5). What are some practical ways we can behold and rehearse God's goodness every day?

4. Psalm 130 speaks of waiting "for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning" (v. 6). This psalm belongs to a category of psalms known as the Songs of Ascent, and Shelbi describes it as "a song of pilgrimage." How is a waiting season like a pilgrimage? Can you look back at a waiting season you've experienced and trace how God led you to ascend to Him through it?

watch the accompanying videos from Shelbi here:



Part II

Beholding Jesus: The Truth



December 7

The Eighteen-Inch Journey

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."
—John 17:3

CONSIDER THIS

When someone is near the end, we listen differently—aware that every word carries weight. Final words are rarely trivial, and this is certainly true of Jesus. In John 17, just before His arrest, trial, and crucifixion,

Jesus offers a four-word definition of eternal life: "that they know you."

A truth that haunts me is that it's possible to know all kinds of things *about* Jesus and still never *really* know Him. Jesus's half-brother James presses this point even further when he says, "Even the demons believe that [there is one God]—and shudder" (James 2:19). Put simply, belief that fails to move beyond words and into obedience is not enough.

For a long time, anytime I'd come across this verse, a wave of fear would wash over me, and I would quietly resolve to do more and work harder to prove to myself and God that my faith was real. But I've come to see that when there's a gap between what we say we believe and how we actually live, it is often because that belief has not yet made the essential eighteen-inch journey from the head to the heart.

For some, intentional effort helps bridge that distance. As Dallas Willard reminds us: "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning."[3] But for those of us prone to performance and perfectionism, the invitation is often different: to slow down, to stop striving, and to make space to simply be with Jesus.

Imagine asking me to describe my marriage and hearing me respond with facts about my husband—his birthdate,

3. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 61.

hair color, favorite food, or the date of our wedding. If that's all I said, you might reasonably wonder whether I actually know him at all. Why? Because true knowing is relational. It moves beyond abstract agreement and enters into dynamic engagement and experiential trust. All of which requires time, presence, attentiveness, a curiosity that leans in to discover, and a willingness to let ourselves be known in return.

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you. . . ."

Jesus reframes our understanding of eternal life—not as something that begins after death but as a quality of life available now, rooted in a lived, relational knowledge of God.

Advent reminds us that the God who made us was willing to cross the distance from heaven to earth so that we might truly know Him. To behold Jesus as the truth is to receive God not as an idea to master but as a person who has come near to be known.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for making Yourself known to us through Your Son. Holy Spirit, help me to seek the Lord not just for information but for transformation. I want to know You and be known by You. Teach me how to be with You and live my life as a response to Your love. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- If someone were to ask you to describe your relationship with God in this season, what would you say?
- Relational knowing requires not only seeing but being seen. What part of your life feels hardest to bring honestly before Jesus right now? Take a moment to name it in His presence.
- Are you more prone to performance or passivity in your faith?
- If performance: Where might Jesus be inviting you to slow down and spend unhurried time with Him?
- If passivity: Where might He be inviting you to act on what you already know?



Making Room

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.
—Luke 2:6-7

CONSIDER THIS

Hindsight is 20/20.

Surely, if the innkeeper had known who Mary was about to give birth to, this scene would have played

out differently. The inconvenience would have been welcomed. What felt like a disruption would have become an honor.

Hindsight is great for understanding the past, but life, as Søren Kierkegaard once observed, must be lived forward. The innkeeper's moment came and went, but Revelation 3:20 reminds us that we face a similar decision. And, unlike the innkeeper, we get to respond with hindsight.

Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (ESV).

I'm sure your life is full. Maybe you're a new parent, and just the thought of adding one more thing to your life feels overwhelming. Or maybe you're a student or just started a new job, and your days are so demanding that even rest feels rushed. We sing, "It's the most wonderful time of the year," but the song of our lives sounds more like, "It's the most busy time of the year."

But imagine Taylor Swift (or whoever your favorite celebrity is) came knocking on your door while you were right in the middle of something really important. Would you ignore her? Would you say, "Hey, thanks for coming but I've got a lot going on. Can you come back next week?" I don't think so.

Why? Because the moment you see someone you hold in high regard standing at your door, everything that was once primary becomes secondary. In a matter of seconds

we rearrange our priorities; where there was once no room, we become willing to do whatever is necessary to make room.

The same is true in our relationship with Jesus. When we truly behold who it is that's standing at our door knocking, we become reenchanted with the wonder, the joy, and the sheer honor that *He* came to *our* house and, more than that, that He wants to come in. What once felt like a duty is transformed into delight.

Like the innkeeper, we are given a choice: to open the door and rearrange our lives or not.

Behold. Look again. Listen closely. Do you hear Him knocking?

God does not force His way in. He waits patiently for our response—and He promises that when we open the door, He will surely come in.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, as I move through this day, help me recognize Your knock. Reenchant my heart with the wonder of Your nearness. Holy Spirit, reveal what needs to be rearranged in my heart and in my schedule so I can welcome You with joy. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- What is most likely to keep you from opening the door to Jesus right now—not because you don't love Him but because your life already feels full? Name the distractions, fears, or commitments that crowd the doorway of your heart.
- Take a moment to meditate on Revelation 3:20. Using your sanctified imagination, picture the one who stands at the door and knocks. Who is He? What is He like? What does His presence bring with it? Write down what you notice as you behold Him.
- If you truly believed it was Jesus standing at your door, what would need to shift in your life to make room for Him? What might need to be rearranged, released, or reprioritized—not out of obligation but in response to who He is?



Looks Can Be Deceiving

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
—Isaiah 53:2b–3a

"People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."
—1 Samuel 16:7b

CONSIDER THIS

The other day I was eating an apple when I bit into the core and a seed fell out. As I held the seed in my hand, I couldn't escape the absurdity of it—that the giant red apple I was eating, the juices of which were now escaping out of the corners of my mouth, was once this tiny seed. On this ordinary Monday afternoon, as I contemplated how *this* came from *that*, my kitchen was transformed into a portal of awe and wonder.

From that small seed grew a tree. As it was tended to by farmers and sustained by the God-designed rhythms of the earth, it matured and multiplied, bearing fruit that would eventually nourish my own body.

And as I stood there contemplating all this, a confronting question settled in: How often do I miss the fruit God intends because I dismiss what He's doing in seed form?

Seeds are easy to overlook. The size, shape, and color of a seed make it easy to confuse with a piece of dirt. And therein lies the danger: Looks, as they say, can be deceiving. And if we don't take care to look beyond appearances, we are at risk of overlooking or altogether discarding what is alive with possibility.

Scripture reveals this pattern again and again:

- David—the youngest shepherd—is chosen as king over his strong-looking brothers. (1 Sam. 16:7)
- A massive army looks impressive, but God delivers victory through Gideon's three hundred men. (Judg. 7)

- God's power appears absent in weakness, yet His strength is made perfect there. (2 Cor. 12:9)
- The promised Messiah arrives with no beauty or majesty to attract us and is despised rather than celebrated. (Isa. 53:2–3)
- The religious leaders appear righteous on the outside, yet Jesus calls them whitewashed tombs. (Matt. 23:27)
- The cross looks like failure and foolishness, but God calls it wisdom and power. (1 Cor. 1:27)

Paul brings this way of seeing into sharp focus when he writes:

> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Cor. 1:27–29)

The wisdom of the apple seed reminds me that faith, hope, and love all require seeing beyond the surface. Distinguishing between what is true from what is *truest*.

The incarnation of Christ reminds us that the redemption we're longing for and looking for arrived not with spectacle but with silence.

- A baby instead of a king

- A womb instead of a throne
- A feeding trough instead of a palace

If we're honest, we often wait for God to show up fully formed—clear, obvious, unmistakable—when He is far more likely to arrive in seed form: unimpressive, easy to miss. This season calls us to slow down long enough to notice what is small, to steward what is hidden, and to trust that God is still at work beneath the surface.

PRAYER

Creator God, You are at work in ways I cannot yet see. Forgive me for overlooking what is small, quiet, or still becoming. Give me eyes to recognize the seeds You've placed in my life—the beginnings that feel ordinary, unfinished, or unimpressive. Teach me to resist the urge to judge too quickly what You are patiently growing and make me into a faithful steward of small beginnings. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- What might God be doing right now that you are tempted to overlook because it looks or feels too small, ordinary, or unfinished to matter?
- Is there something God may be asking you to steward patiently rather than evaluate quickly? What might faithful tending look like?
- Take a moment to hold whatever this may be—an idea, a relationship, a project, etc.—before the Lord in

prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see it with eyes of faith: not only for what it is now but for what it could become and how it might one day nourish others. Write down anything that comes to mind.

- Take a moment to reflect on the Lord's faithfulness. What is something that began as a small seed in your life but has now grown to bear fruit? How might remembering His past faithfulness inspire you to trust Him more fully in this season of small, seedlike faith?

December 10

Honest Advent

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power

of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." . . .

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.
—Luke 1:11-20, 26-38

CONSIDER THIS

At its most basic level, truth is simply that which corresponds to reality. Influential business leader Max De Pree once said, "The first responsibility of a leader is to *define reality*."[4] And in the secular age we're living in, which treats being true to oneself as the highest moral good and locates authority in our inner feelings, the task of defining reality has never been more urgent.

As we saw yesterday, if we're not careful, what *feels* true can quickly replace what is *truest*. And this is where the tension emerges. Much of the Christian life is lived in the gap between what we feel to be true and what God has promised to be true.

We feel anxious, yet God promises peace.

We experience lack, yet God promises to provide our daily bread.

4. Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (Currency, 2004), 9, emphasis added.

We feel alone, yet God promises to be with us always.

So how do we respond to the gap?

Mary's posture offers a helpful starting place.

When the angel appears to Mary, she does not suppress her fear or ignore the cost of what she is being asked to carry. As she receives God's promise, she asks an honest question: "How will this be?" Notice how her response differs from Zechariah's. When the very same angel tells him that his wife will bear a son, Zechariah does not ask "How will this be?" but "How can I be sure of this?" While Zechariah reaches for certainty and control rooted in unbelief, Mary leans into trust.

In this way, Mary models how to define reality rightly. She does not allow fear to dictate what is true, nor does she ignore the uncertainty she faces. Instead, she acknowledges the unknown while anchoring herself in the faithfulness of God. Faith does not eliminate the gap between promise and experience, but it teaches us how to live faithfully within it—refusing to let the *how* overshadow the *who*.

In an age that tempts us to grant ultimate authority to our feelings, Advent calls us back to a deeper truth: Reality is not defined by what we feel most intensely but by what God has promised most faithfully. To live in truth, then, is not to deny our experience but to hold it within the larger, steadier reality of God's presence and promises.

PRAYER

Father, You know the particular pain of the gap I live in—between what I feel and what You have promised. Help me name my fear without letting it define reality. Anchor my heart not in certainty but in the promise of Your love that never lets me go. Holy Spirit, when I'm tempted to get stuck in the how, teach me to cling to who You are. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Name the gap: Where do you feel a gap right now between what you are experiencing and what God has promised? What emotions, circumstances, or questions are most present for you?
- What would it look like this week to define reality not by what you feel most intensely but by what God has promised most faithfully? Is there one promise of God you can return to in prayer or reflection as you wait?
- Write down that scripture and place it somewhere you will see it each day, allowing the character and promises of God to buoy your hope and anchor your joy this Advent season.

December 11

Moving Toward Mystery

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.
—Matthew 1:18–25

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!
—1 Corinthians 13:12 MSG

CONSIDER THIS

Joseph doesn't get much airtime in the Advent story. In fact, across all four gospels, Joseph speaks a grand total of zero lines. The bulk of what we learn about him comes not through his words but through his actions. And in his quiet obedience, we discover a way of navigating mystery without needing all the answers.

When Joseph first learns of his fiancée's pregnancy, he plans to respond with both grace and unwavering

adherence to the law. But after one encounter with an angel in a dream, he does what, at that time, would have been understood as the unthinkable—he marries his pregnant fiancée. In the dream, the angel gives Joseph very little detail. With such limited information, he certainly doesn't have the full picture or a clear plan for how to navigate what comes next. Even still, he moves into immediate action, exercising what's often referred to as "first-time obedience."

The next time we run into Joseph in the gospel of Matthew is on the heels of another divine visitation. An angel appears to him in another dream, telling him to "get up" and escape to Egypt due to the imminent threat of Herod's murderous intent (2:13). After the warning, the text says, "So he got up" (v. 14). Again, with no hesitation, Joseph breaks from what I'm sure felt stable and familiar, trusting God's word of warning over his own comfort.

I can't help but notice the sheer amount of mystery in these interactions. I think sometimes we're tempted to look back on stories like this and think, *Ahhhh, if God would just speak to me like this, I would obey like that too.* But would we?

Joseph is human, and in both of these examples the obedience required was costly, disruptive, and terrifying—realities compounded by the absence of details we often feel entitled to before we're willing to take action. Details like where exactly in Egypt to go, an estimated timeline of how long they would live there, or

the assurance that he would be able to find work to feed his family.

I want to think that I'm someone who is more than willing to dance in the mystery of life. (It sounds so whimsical.) But if I'm honest, when I'm confronted with the call to obey and begin wading into the mystery that surrounds it, my posture tends to be less footloose and free and more clenched fists and wobbly knees.

What compelled Joseph to act with such little clarity—to move before it all made sense? Scripture tells us he was "faithful to the law" (1:19), which suggests that God's Word carried real weight and authority in his life. Perhaps in the moments when obedience required courage, Joseph wasn't waiting for certainty but leaning on a deeper trust, rehearsing words like Isaiah 55 in his heart:

> As the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts.
> As the rain and snow
> come down from heaven,
> and do not return to it
> without watering the earth
> and making it bud and flourish,
> so that it yields seed for the sower and bread
> for the eater,
> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
> It will not return to me empty,
> but will accomplish what I desire

> and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (vv. 9-11)

For Joseph, the word of the Lord was not a suggestion to be considered but a reality to be trusted. And like him, we are invited to move forward—wobbly knees and all—trusting that the word God has given will accomplish its purpose, even when the path ahead remains hidden.

PRAYER

Jesus, when the way ahead feels unclear and obedience feels costly, teach me to trust Your word, which does not return empty, without demanding all the details. Holy Spirit, give me courage like Joseph to get up and move even with wobbly knees and unanswered questions. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where might God be inviting you to take a faithful step of obedience?
- When you sense God inviting you to act before everything makes sense, what thoughts or emotions do you notice?
- What might God be inviting you to trust about Him in the midst of uncertainty, when many details remain hidden?

December 12

Living in Light of Eternity

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
—Revelation 21:1-5a

CONSIDER THIS

What we believe about the future directly shapes how we live today.

When I was first diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy, much of the encouragement I received was anchored in convictions about the life to come. I was reminded that my present body is just a "tent" and that one day I will be "clothed with a heavenly dwelling." People reassured me that while life is full of pain and brokenness now, a day is soon coming when all suffering will be swallowed up by the fullness of God's kingdom—a day when, as Revelation 21:4 promises, there will be "'no more death' or mourning or crying or pain."

For many years, this truth buoyed my hope, especially on the hard days—until it didn't.

In my mid-twenties, I experienced a season of depression so dark and disorienting that the thought of fast-tracking my way to heaven started to seem like the best option. When life felt unbearable, I found myself rehearsing what I had always been taught: There is a place where none of the hard things exist, and it's called heaven. I was tired of waiting, and in my depression, death began to feel like the only escape to relieve the pain I was despairing under. It wasn't until I was collapsing under

the weight of what felt like total defeat that I began to realize I was living with half the story.

Yes, a day is coming when God will fully and finally establish His kingdom on the earth. A day when everything lost under sin and death will be restored. But the kingdom of God is not just a future reality; it is here now, in part. And when we lose sight of the here and now reality of God's kingdom, it's not long before heaven gets reduced to a cosmic form of escapism. That's what happened to me: My hope for heaven had quietly become a way of escaping the present rather than meeting God in it.

The advent of Jesus marked the irreversible establishment of the kingdom of God on the earth, and His resurrection, as N. T. Wright observes, "is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but *to colonize earth with the life of heaven*."[5] That means heaven is not merely the place where suffering ends; it is the life of God that meets us in our suffering and begins making all things new even now.

We live in the tension between two advents—between what God has already begun and what He has promised to complete. And as we live in this overlap of the ages, the

5. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008), 208.

"already and not yet" of His kingdom, may we remember that Jesus Himself is the reward of both this life and the next. In the light of His presence, "all our blessings are enriched, all our griefs and trials are softened."[6]

PRAYER

Jesus, thank You for the promise that a day is coming when all things will be made new. And thank You that Your kingdom has already begun to break into our lives, even here, even now. When I am tempted to escape this life instead of receiving it, remind me that You are present with me in it. Meet me in my suffering with the life of heaven—strength for today, light for the darkness, and hope that does not disappoint. Holy Spirit, strengthen me to live in the tension between what You have already begun and what You have promised to complete. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- As you notice the tension between Jesus's first coming and His promised return, what comes up for you? Are there desires, pain, or circumstances that require faithful waiting?
- How might Advent reframe your understanding of hope—not as denial of pain but as confidence in God's presence within it?

6. Practicing the Way, *Sabbath Meditations*, abridged digital version (Practicing the Way, 2022), 14, https://storage2.snappages.site/VKV229/assets/files/Sabbath-Meditations.pdf.

- Is there a place—internal or external—where God may be inviting you to participate in His renewing work rather than withdrawing from it?

Part II Conversation Guide



Beholding Jesus: The Truth

Focus Entries: #8 & #11
Focus Verses: Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:6-7; 1 Corinthians 13:12
Theme Verse: *"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!"* —1 Corinthians 13:12 MSG

DISCUSSION

1. Advent is a busy season, and as we get closer to Christmas, commitments and preparations seem to fill our days. But the hurriedness doesn't always confine itself to our calendars; it can make its way into our hearts too. How are you resisting busyness in this season to make room for Jesus?
2. We often find mystery uncomfortable and prefer to have clarity and details before we act. But Advent is full of mystery—the incarnation, a rising star signaling the King's birth, dreams, and angelic visitations—and we're invited to celebrate it. What are some ways we can lay aside our need to understand and simply receive the mystery in God's work as a gift?

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Life's demands can be loud, especially at Advent. Not only do we feel pressure around practical preparations, but we also often experience emotional turbulence as the season can remind us of who we've lost and bring us into proximity with people we have trouble getting along with. All this internal noise can drown out the sound of Jesus's knocking as He asks to be let into our hearts and lives. How can we turn away from the noise and tune into Jesus's call to us during this season?
2. When have you experienced God calling you to obey without giving you all the details? What happened? Was stepping out in faith worth it? If you didn't follow through, how can you grow your trust in God so that next time He calls you to move, you're ready to go, wobbly knees and all?
3. Are you willing to do whatever is necessary to make room for Jesus in your life? If not, what are you afraid will happen when you let go to allow Jesus more access to your heart?
4. First Corinthians 13:12 tells us that though we might feel like we're looking at a foggy path, God sees us clearly. How can focusing on the truth that God sees us clearly comfort us when we can't see the way forward?

watch the accompanying videos from Shelbi here:



Part III

Beholding Jesus: The Life





Love Gives

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
—1 John 4:9–12

CONSIDER THIS

On July 31, 1941, sirens rang out from Cell Block 14 in the Auschwitz concentration camp. A prisoner had escaped, and as punishment the Gestapo chose ten men at random to be sentenced to death by starvation in an underground bunker. The ninth man selected was Franciszek Gajowniczek. When Franciszek heard his name, he cried out, "Ah, my poor wife and my children. They'll never see me again."

At that moment, a short Polish man with round wire-frame glasses stepped out and said, "Look, I'm a Catholic priest. I don't have a wife and children . . . I want to die instead of that man." And to everyone's amazement, his offer was accepted.

That priest was forty-seven-year-old Maximilian Kolbe. Along with the others, he entered the starvation bunker, where he led them in prayer and hymns, transforming the atmosphere from despair to hope.

Fifteen days later, Kolbe was killed with a lethal injection of carbolic acid.

John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." I love how *The Message* paraphrases it: "This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends."

The story of Maximilian laying down his life for someone who wasn't even his friend is powerful. It speaks to an ache we all carry: the longing to be loved by a love that gives freely, sacrificially, for the good of another.

This is the love we long for. And yet, you don't have to look far to see how our world is increasingly atrophying our capacity to love in this way. We inhabit a society that relentlessly catechizes us into placing the self at the center—and then builds entire industries to monetize our insecurity. Is it any wonder why our relationships have become so transactional, so consumeristic?

Sheldon Vanauken, in his book *A Severe Mercy*, realigns us to love's true north when he writes, "To be in love, as to see beauty, is a kind of adoring that turns the lover away from self."[7]

Said another way: Love gives.

The advent of Christ flows out of the river of love pouring from the Father's heart. Behold afresh the wonder of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave . . ."

The Father did not send the Son out of anger or a desire to condemn the world, but because He loves us. The cross is the clearest picture of this love. As 1 John 4:10 says: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Forty-one years later, on October 10, 1982, Kolbe's death was put in its proper perspective. In Saint Peter's Square in Rome, among a crowd of 150,000 people, stood Franciszek Gajowniczek—the very man who had experienced the life-giving power of Kolbe's love all

7. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy: A Story of Faith, Tragedy, and Triumph* (Harper & Row, 1977), 43.

those years before. That day, the pope described Kolbe's death as a "sign of victory"—a victory like that won by our Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary.[8]

Gajowniczek later testified that Kolbe's sacrifice restored his hope in a place designed to extinguish it, gave him strength to survive the camp, and marked him for life as a witness to what Christlike love looks like under absolute pressure. Gajowniczek lived into his nineties, forever changed by a love he could not repay, and he spent the rest of his life bearing witness to the man who had died in his place.

May we never forget that to be formed by Christ is to be shaped into people who love this way—freely, sacrificially, and without guarantee of return. Such love is never wasted.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for loving us first. Jesus, thank You for modeling a love that gives freely and suffers willingly. Holy Spirit, where fear or self-protection has narrowed our love, open us again that we might become a vessel of self-giving love. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

8. Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Canonization of St. Maximilian Kolbe*, October 10, 1982, accessed via Pierced Hearts website.

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Take a moment to write down some specific ways you have experienced the sacrificial love of God in your life. If nothing comes to mind, look to the cross and let it remind you of God's great love for you.
- Where are you still trying to earn a love Christ has already given freely? What would it look like to stop striving there?
- What concrete act of sacrificial love is God inviting you into this week? Who might receive life through your obedience?



A Gift Bestowed

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

> So God created mankind in his own image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule

over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
—Genesis 1:26–28

CONSIDER THIS

When we immerse our imaginations in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, we encounter a foundational truth about the life Jesus makes available to us—one that anchors us in the truth of who we really are.

In his article "It Was 'Good,' Not Perfect," practical theologian John Swinton names this foundational truth by highlighting what distinguishes humans from the rest of creation:

> What distinguishes humans [from the rest of creation] is God's desire to *relate* to them (Gen. 1:26–28). The *imago Dei* is manifested in God's loving gift of relationality. What distinguishes humanity is not superior functionality but God's relational intent. God speaks with human beings, entrusts them with responsibility, and desires communion with them in a way not extended to other creatures. The *imago Dei* is a gift, not a human capacity.[9]

Did you catch that last line? "The *imago Dei* is a *gift*, not a human capacity."

9. John Swinton, "It Was 'Good,' Not Perfect," *Christianity Today*, September/October 2025, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/09/it-was-good-not-perfect, emphasis added.

This is such good news for us!

To be made in the image of God means our belovedness is a gift bestowed. Our value and identity are received, not achieved—and therefore cannot ultimately be lost. To lose sight of this is to slip into a cycle of striving where we start living like we can earn or perform our way into more of God's love. As Timothy Keller points out, "it is only in the gospel of Jesus Christ that you get the verdict before the performance."[10]

Notice how the story of Scripture begins with God blessing humanity *before* they do anything (Gen. 1:28). And while the story quickly bends toward fracture, Scripture goes on to reveal that the God who desires communion with us in the beginning does not abandon that desire after the fall or wait at a distance until we get our act together.

Advent is evidence of that refusal: The God who once breathed life into dust now comes to dwell within it. Jesus comes not to show us how to earn life, but to give it. We see this again at Jesus's baptism. Before He ever gives a sermon, casts out a demon, or performs a miracle, the heavens open and the Father says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Identity and affirmation once again precede performance.

And lest we mistake this affirmation as exclusive to the Son, Jesus extends it to all of us when He says, "As the

10. Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012).

Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9). In other words, the love the Father has for the Son is the very love now extended to us.

Which means we don't live for God's love—we live from it.

All our devotion to God is simply a response to His love that first loved us.

In the same way that the power of Christ's life and ministry flowed from abiding in the Father's affirmation of His belovedness, so our lives are meant to flow not from proving ourselves but from living as those already loved.

PRAYER

God, thank You that my belovedness is a gift bestowed, not something I earn. Free me from striving, and root my life in the truth that I am already loved. Holy Spirit, help me abide in Your gaze of delight. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where are you tempted to define your worth by what you do rather than by who you are in Christ?
- What would change in your prayer, pace, or expectations if you truly believed you are already beloved?

- Set a timer for five minutes and make space to sit with the Father's delight over you, not as something to earn but as something to receive. Hear Him saying over you, "This is my son/daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

December 15

A Love Better than Life

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

You, God, are my God,
    earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
    my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
    where there is no water.

I have seen you in the sanctuary
    and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
    my lips will glorify you.

I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the night.
Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.
I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Those who want to kill me will be destroyed;
they will go down to the depths of the earth.
They will be given over to the sword
and become food for jackals.

But the king will rejoice in God;
all who swear by God will glory in him,
while the mouths of liars will be silenced.
—Psalm 63

CONSIDER THIS

At first glance, this psalm reads as a beautiful depiction of the hunger and thirst that's meant to characterize our pursuit of God. But when you read it in context of the unfolding circumstances of David's personal life, it takes on even greater meaning.

Scholars believe David penned this psalm while fleeing from his son Absalom, who was actively seeking to undermine and overthrow his throne (2 Sam. 15–18).

David is writing not from a place of comfort or stability but from the wilderness while he's on the run.

And yet, it is precisely there—in the dry and parched land—that David beholds God's glory and power.

This psalm reminds us that desire for God is not something reserved for ideal conditions. It is often forged in seasons of struggle, when false attachments are stripped away and the source of our truest hunger and thirst is revealed.

All humans are creatures of desire. But when we route those desires through the wrong thing, it dries up our souls and bankrupts our lives.

Jeremiah 2:13 describes it this way: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

David had all the things the world says you need to live a full life: power, sex, recognition, and lots of it. Yet he says: "Your love is better than life." He had discovered God to be the true source of life that satisfies; everything else is like a broken cistern unable to hold the weight of our deepest desire.

As much as I love seasons when I feel strong and things are going well, I can't say those are the seasons where I learn much. Psalm 63 reminds us that the gap is the gift. David's longing for God does not arise from abundance but from absence, not from ease but from desperation.

The gap between where we are and where we long to be is the place where fresh hunger and thirst for God is stirred up. And as we allow that desperation to drive us deeper into God's presence, "the spring of living water," we, like David, open ourselves to receive the resources we need.

PRAYER

*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, meet me in my dry and weary places. When my desires are scattered or misplaced, draw my hunger back to You. Deliver me from broken cisterns that cannot satisfy. Awaken in me a deeper thirst for the love that is better than life. "*Lord*, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure" (Ps. 16:5). Amen.*

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where do you currently feel the gap in your life—the space between what is and what you long for?
- What are the cisterns you're most tempted to draw from when life feels dry or uncertain? How have those sources left you unsatisfied or weary?
- John 7:37 says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink." Instead of rushing to satisfy your thirst, what might it look like to come to Jesus with it today?

December 16

Lift Up Thine Eyes

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
—Hebrews 12:1–3

Before reading today's reflection, take a moment to look up Norman Rockwell's painting Lift Up Thine Eyes. *It will help you better enter into what follows.*

CONSIDER THIS

American painter and illustrator Norman Rockwell was known for his iconic depictions of American culture. In his piece *Lift Up Thine Eyes*, Rockwell juxtaposes two different types of people: those who look down and those who accept the invitation on the Gothic cathedral, echoing the words of Isaiah 49:18, to "lift up thine eyes."

The bustling street outside the doors of Saint Thomas Church, depicted in Rockwell's illustration, is just twenty minutes from where I live. Go there today and you'll find swarms of people moving with the same determined stride Rockwell captured—though if he painted it now, he'd probably add a phone to every hand.

Nearly everyone in the scene walks with their gaze toward the ground, as if they're lost in thought or shouldering the weight of unseen burdens. Even the custodian hanging the sign outside the church shares in that same downward pull. Only the cleric lifts his gaze, noticing a flock of doves rising into the sky.

Like those in the painting, we can get so wrapped up in our own lives that we end up living out our days embodying a similar posture—heads down, hurried, and preoccupied—failing to see the invitation always before us to notice the beauty and goodness that's present even in the most ordinary of days.

The call to *lift up thine eyes* is placed at the threshold of the space where God's presence is known to dwell, reminding us that God has not withdrawn from the world; we have simply stopped paying attention. And if that's true, then this image isn't simply a commentary on the busyness of modern life; it's a mirror, inviting us to consider the posture we've adopted as we move through our own days and what we might be missing along the way.

It should come as no surprise to us that those who had the honor of beholding Jesus as a baby were those who were willing to look up.

At the sound of the angels, the shepherds shifted their gaze from the ground to the heavens (Luke 2:8-14).

At the rising of a star, the Magi lifted their eyes and journeyed toward its light (Matt. 2:1-12).

At the prompting of the Spirit, Simeon and Anna lifted their eyes and beheld salvation in the flesh (Luke 2:25-38).

Wherever you find yourself today, the invitation is the same: Lift up thine eyes—pause, notice, and remember that God is at work. He waits to be wanted.

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, lift my eyes when they drift downward. Slow my hurried heart and help me notice where You are already at work. Teach me to look up, to want You, and to receive You with wonder. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- For our response time today, I invite you into a simple practice of prayer called *visio divina*—a way of slowing down and paying attention to what God might be saying through this piece of art. Rather than rushing to interpret or analyze it, we'll simply look, notice, and allow God to meet us through what we see.

1. **Look.**
   a. Take a moment to look back at Norman Rockwell's *Lift Up Thine Eyes.*
   b. Ask:
      • What do I notice first?
      • What detail keeps drawing my attention?

2. **Reflect.**
   a. As you continue to look, notice what resonates emotionally.
   b. Ask:
      • Which figure feels most like me today?
      • What might my posture reveal about my inner life right now?

3. **Respond.**
   a. Speak honestly to God.
   b. Bring your response to God in prayer.
      • If you feel weary, name it.
      • If you feel distracted, confess it gently.
      • If you sense longing, offer it openly.
      • You might pray: "God, I notice how often my eyes are downcast. Help me to lift my gaze, to see You at work in my ordinary days."

4. **Rest.**
   a. Now sit quietly with the image.
   b. Release the need to analyze or fix anything.
   c. Imagine yourself standing at the church entrance, hearing the words that are above you: "Lift up thine eyes."
   d. Rest in the truth that God's presence is not absent—only waiting to be noticed.

5. **Live.**
   a. As you move back into your life, choose one small practice:
      • Lift your eyes during your commute.
      • Pause before checking your phone.
      • Notice beauty where you usually rush past it.
   b. Remember, God is already at work, and He invites us to join him. He waits to be wanted.



Defiant Joy

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and Stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."
—Luke 2:8-11

CONSIDER THIS

Joy is our inheritance. And yet most of us spend our lives feeling like we can't quite get our hands on it—and the world around us isn't helping.

Our modern Western culture, shaped largely by a secular worldview, assumes that the material world is all there is—and so meaning, purpose, and joy get located in the pursuit of personal happiness. It's an appealing idea. But it carries a hidden cost—one that is slowly bankrupting our lives.

When this becomes the lens through which we see our lives, pain and suffering can only ever be interpreted as interruptions—unwelcome obstacles standing between us and the good life. And so, instinctively, we do what any reasonable person would do: We work hard to avoid them, minimize them, or escape them as quickly as possible.

The trouble is, it doesn't work. Again and again we discover that when we shut down vulnerability and pain, we end up shutting out joy, gratitude, and love as well. We cannot selectively numb. And so joy becomes a hostage to circumstance—present when life cooperates, just out of reach when it doesn't.

It is into this exhausting cycle that the biblical story speaks a better word.

The announcement of the Messiah's arrival—the good news of great joy for all people—is first entrusted not to kings, priests, or the socially elite, but to shepherds.

For the original audience, this would have come as a complete shock. In the first century, shepherds occupied the margins of society. Their work kept them ceremonially unclean, their testimony was often considered unreliable, and their social standing was low, making them the least likely people anyone would expect to carry news of this magnitude.

And yet, they are the first to hear it, the first invited into this great joy.

The choice of shepherds is itself a theology of joy. By entrusting this announcement to those on the margins—with low status and poor living conditions—we are reminded of how the biblical story dislodges joy from the poverty of our circumstances and anchors it in the riches of God's presence and promises.

The story never suggests that anything about the shepherds' circumstances changed. After seeing Jesus, they likely returned to the same fields, doing the same work that carried the same stigma. Only now, they carried with them the joy of knowing that God's presence had entered their ordinary and often overlooked lives in the person of Jesus Christ.

From the very beginning, joy is revealed not as the result of a pain-free life but as a gift made available to all people in all situations through God's presence.

Accessing this gift, however, requires a kind of godly defiance—a refusal to let our joy be dictated by our circumstances. Defiant joy is not the denial of pain or

loss. It's not forced positivity or pretending like everything is fine. It's joy that looks pain in the face and says, "You don't get to decide what's ultimately true."

This is why David in the face of real danger can pray, "Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. . . . in your presence there is fullness of joy" (Ps. 16:1, 11). Notice that David doesn't fix his attention on the removal of danger but on the God in whom his security rests within the danger.

In a world obsessed with outcomes and optimization, defiant joy is an act of resistance rooted in the unshakable truth that God's presence with us is the defining feature of true joy.

PRAYER

Father, free me from the lie that joy depends on my circumstances. Meet me in the middle of what is hard, unfinished, or uncertain, and anchor my heart in Your presence. Jesus, when pain presses in, teach me a defiant joy—one that does not deny grief but refuses to let it have the last word. Be my refuge. Be my joy. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where might God be inviting you into defiant joy—a joy that refuses to let circumstances have the final word?

- What might it look like to fix your attention not on the removal of fear or worry but on the God who is with you within it?
- Is there a place of pain or uncertainty where you can gently say, "Pain, you don't get to decide what's ultimately true"? What would it look like for you this week to practice joy not as denial but as trust in God's presence?

December 18

Letting Go to Lay Hold

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done."
—Matthew 16:24-27

For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.
—Philippians 1:21

CONSIDER THIS

I don't think anyone intentionally sets out to trade who they really are for something else. I think deep down we all long to live lives full of meaning and purpose. And yet, Matthew 16 brings us this sobering warning: Where you turn to find those things will either draw you deeper into the life you long for or drive you further away from it.

What, then, does it look like to guard against losing our lives? How do we fight the temptation to forfeit our souls?

In Matthew 16, Jesus draws His disciples away from the noise and distraction of the crowds to prepare them for what is coming. He starts with a question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (v. 13). Then He shifts from the crowd's speculation to their personal confession: "Who do *you* say I am?" (v. 15).

This is the question every human heart must answer.

Peter replies, "You are the Christ" (v. 16 ESV). Peter's confession cuts through the crowd's conjecture and, with just four words, gathers up all the hopes and promises, all the prophecies and messianic longing of the entire Hebrew Scriptures, and attributes them to Jesus. While others sense the spiritual weight of Jesus's presence, Peter is given eyes to see: Jesus is not merely a teacher or a prophet but the King Himself. With this revelation and confession of Jesus's true identity crystallized in the

hearts of His disciples, Jesus responds by readying them for what's to come—the cross.

Unable to reconcile a suffering Messiah with the life he thought Jesus had come to bring, Peter, rather than trusting Jesus, begins to rebuke Him. As much as I want to criticize or critique Peter's reaction, I can't help but hear my own scared voice in his rebuke. If we're not careful, when our circumstances fall short of our expectation, the disillusionment and disappointment of that experience can begin to distort our vision of God and draw us into self-protection. But Jesus, being the good rabbi He is, interrupts this impulse and reorients His disciple toward the way of true life: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

Jesus is saying the life we long for cannot be grasped by protecting ourselves from loss, pain, or surrender. Paradoxically, it is only found by entrusting our lives fully to Jesus—even when the path leads through suffering.

The temptation to save or satisfy ourselves on our own terms is strong, especially when faith becomes inconvenient or costly. Yet Jesus exposes the lie beneath that impulse: In trying to preserve ourselves, we slowly lose ourselves. But when we release our grip—our need for control, certainty, or self-protection—and place the full weight of our identity and purpose in Him, we discover that the way of surrender is the way of life.

Johann Christoph Arnold captures this truth with striking clarity:

> The only way to truly overcome our fear of death is to live life in such a way that its meaning cannot be taken away by death. This sounds grandiose, but it is really very simple. It means fighting the impulse to live for ourselves, instead of for others. It means choosing generosity over greed. It also means living humbly, rather than seeking influence or powers. Finally, it means being ready to die again and again—to ourselves, and to every self-serving opinion or agenda.[11]

To behold Jesus as the life is to trust that His way—however costly—is the only way that leads to resurrection life.

PRAYER

Jesus, I confess how easily I try to save my life on my own terms. Free me from fear, self-protection, and the need for control. Help me trust that Your way, even when it costs me, is the only way that leads to life. Jesus, you are worthy. Holy Spirit, help me place the full weight of my identity and future in You. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

11. Johann Christoph Arnold, "Be Not Afraid," in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Plough Publishing House, 2014), 150.

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- What disappointment or unmet expectation has recently shaped the way you see God? How might that disappointment be influencing your trust in—or resistance to—Him?
- When Jesus says, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it," what kind of life are you most afraid of losing? Comfort? Certainty? Approval? Control?
- What is one concrete step of surrender Jesus may be inviting you to take this week?

Part III Conversation Guide



Beholding Jesus: The Life

Focus Entries: #15, #17, #18
Focus Verses: Psalm 63; Matthew 16:24-27; Luke 2:8-11; Philippians 1:21
Theme Verse: *"For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain."* —Philippians 1:21

DISCUSSION

1. In Psalm 63, David expresses his intense longing for God: "I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water" (v. 1). How have seasons of dryness and desperation increased your desire for God? How can we cultivate a deep longing for God's presence in seasons of abundance?
2. What do you make of Jesus's paradoxical statement that if we try to save our lives, we will lose them, but if we lose our lives for Him, we will find them? How have you found this to be true in your own experience?

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Jesus wants his disciples to wrestle with who they believe Jesus to be before he tells them about how He will suffer? How does our understanding of who Jesus is and our belief in His identity as the Christ affect our ability to face our own cross?
2. We think of Advent as a joyous season and rightfully so! But for some, Advent also involves sadness and the weight of loss. How does the idea of defiant joy—joy that does not deny our pain but does deny its right to decide what is true—help us lay hold of the life that Jesus offers?
3. David proclaimed, "Your love is better than life" (Ps. 63:3). How has God showed you that His love is better than life?
4. In day 18, Shelbi writes, "If we're not careful, when our circumstances fall short of our expectation, the disillusionment and disappointment of that experience can begin to distort our vision of God and draw us into self-protection." When life isn't going how we expected or wanted it to, how can we avoid the pitfalls of trying to protect ourselves from feeling the pain and lean into Jesus as the way that leads to life?

watch the accompanying videos from Shelbi here:



Part IV

Beholding Jesus: Immanuel



December 19

God with Us

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.
—John 1:1-4

CONSIDER THIS

In John's gospel, there's no birth story, no manger, and no genealogy. Bypassing Bethlehem entirely, he takes us all the way back to the beginning.

In the beginning was the Word . . .

That opening line is a clear echo of Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning . . ."). Right from the jump, John wants us to know that Jesus is not just sent by God—Jesus *is* God, present before anything existed.

John then introduces Jesus to us as the Word, which in Greek is *logos*. For Jewish readers, *logos* was God's creative, revealing, covenant-making speech. For Greek readers, *logos* was the rational principle holding the whole world together. In bringing these understandings together, John is making a staggering claim: The God who creates, speaks, sustains, and reveals Himself has taken on flesh in the person of Jesus.

God is with us! This is the headline John wants tattooed on our spirits. And while Matthew and Luke tell us how Jesus came, John presses deeper, showing us what it means that He came.

The incarnation means God has made Himself known.

The incarnation means God has moved toward us.

The incarnation means life is available now.

A quick word on each.

First, the incarnation means that Jesus is the clearest revelation of who God is. To see Jesus healing the sick, touching the untouchable, forgiving sinners, freeing captives, subverting systems of injustice, washing feet,

and laying down His life even unto death is to behold the very heart of God.

Second, the incarnation means that God is not distant from or disinterested in our lives. John goes on to say, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (v. 14 ESV). That word *dwelt* in the original language means "tabernacled." John intentionally uses this word as a hyperlink to Israel's wilderness story, where the manifest presence of God traveled with the people in the tabernacle. John here drives home the point that the arrival of Jesus reveals how God, compelled by love, willingly chose to move into the mess of our lives and made a way for us to live in His presence. From the very beginning, God's desire has been to dwell with His people.

Third and finally, the incarnation means life is available now. John consistently connects Jesus's coming with life. John 1:4 says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." Jesus Himself testifies to this when He says:

"I am the bread of life" (6:35).

"I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

"I came that they may have life, and have it to the full" (10:10).

Later in John's gospel, he shows us that while God came near in Jesus (incarnation), He stays near through the Holy Spirit (indwelling). Jesus says, "Whoever believes

in me . . . rivers of living water will flow from within them." John then clarifies, "By this he meant the Spirit" (7:38-39). This means the life on offer through Jesus is not only *promised*—it is *poured out*. The Spirit is how the life Jesus embodied becomes available to us now.

So wherever you find yourself today, whatever you might be facing, the incarnation assures us that we are not alone. God is with us.

PRAYER

God, You spoke the world into being and chose to dwell within it. Thank you, Lord. Help me receive Your nearness not as an idea but as a living presence. Jesus, let Your life take root in me and Your light shape how I see everything else. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- A. W. Tozer once said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God."[12] When you think about God, what images or assumptions come to mind? What would it look like to get curious with Him about these today?
- Where in your life do you feel tempted to believe that God is distant, disinterested, or absent?

12. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (Harper & Row, 1978), 1.

- What would it look like to trust that God has chosen to "move into the neighborhood" of that very place where you felt He was absent?

December 20

With Us in the Ordinary

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
—Colossians 3:17

CONSIDER THIS

I love when God moves in big, dramatic ways. Those moments when our awareness of God's omnipresence gives way to an encounter with His manifest presence. But most of life isn't a burning bush. It's laundry. Text messages. Bills to pay. The same conversation with

your kid for the ninth time. A long line at the grocery store. Another email. Another meal to make. Another day. And if we're not careful, we start living as if God is only "with us" in the big moments, when we're grieving, celebrating, or making a major decision. But as Tish Harrison Warren reminds us in *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, "God is forming us into a new people. And the place of that formation is in the small moments of today."[13]

Colossians 3:17 gives us the posture that's required to remain aware of and responsive to God's presence in our everyday ordinary lives. "Whatever you do . . . do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." Not some things. Not the spiritual things. *All* things. This posture of allness unto the Lord is what keeps us tethered to Him in the mundane moments of life.

Advent reminds us that God's arrival wasn't a spectacle staged on a platform. It happened in the ordinary, easily overlooked places: a teenage girl's body, a carpenter's home, a feeding trough. God chose the unglamorous on purpose. And this means that your ordinary life is not a spiritual obstacle. It's the primary location of God's presence.

Sometimes we miss this because we're looking for God in a different life. A more impressive life. A more efficient life. A less complicated life. And yet Jesus keeps meeting people in their actual lives—on dusty roads, in

13. Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 21.

crowded homes, at wells, in boats, at tables. He sanctifies the mundane by showing up inside it, breaking the sacred-spiritual divide we tend to build.

The invitation of this day is not to escape your life in order to find God, but to practice noticing that God has already joined you in it. Not as a spectator, but as a companion. Not waiting for you to get somewhere else, but present with you here.

And there's a strange freedom in that. Because if God is with us in the ordinary, then nothing is wasted—not the repetition, not the boredom, not the unseen faithfulness. Even the small acts—wiping the counter, changing diapers, choosing patience, offering attention—can become communion.

PRAYER

Jesus, I confess I often look past my life in search of You. Teach me to behold Your presence in the ordinary. Holy Spirit, make my simple unseen acts of faithfulness a place of communion with You today. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where in your everyday life have you assumed God is less present? What would it look like to intentionally invite Him into that today?
- Taking a moment to engage your sanctified imagination, picture Jesus being with you right now. Where is He? What is He doing?

- What is one ordinary task you will do today (a meeting, a commute, a meal, a conversation)? How might you do it "in the name of the Lord Jesus"?

December 21

With Us in Suffering

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

> "For your sake we face death all day long;
> we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
—Romans 8:35-37

CONSIDER THIS

To the church in Rome—a community marked by ethnic tension, social vulnerability under imperial power, and deep anxiety about their place in God's family—Paul makes an extraordinary claim: "We are more than conquerors." But notice how he defines this victory. He does not say we become conquerors after our troubles pass, or once we overcome them. He says we are more than conquerors "*in* all these things."

That word *in* radically redefines what victory means.

We love verses about being "more than conquerors," especially as Americans. We love this idea because it screams of success and power and winning, which is like the trifecta of our cultural values. Culturally, we're hard-wired to think that victory is the absence of trouble and hardship. We think victory is about getting through and getting over the bad we're currently facing and getting into the good that's on the other side. Our version of victory doesn't usually include weakness.

But that definition collapses under the weight of real life. It leaves little to no room for suffering that doesn't resolve quickly—or neatly—or at all.

For me, being diagnosed with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy was one of those defining moments in life where you come face-to-face with the reality of just how fragile life really is. We are all much weaker and more dependent than we like to admit, not just physically but in every way. Navigating life with a progressive disability

continuously confronts my assumptions about what it really means to live victoriously.

In a world that constantly conditions us to avoid weakness—or at least the appearance of it—at all costs, our default reaction is often some form of distraction. We avoid the ache of our loneliness by packing our schedules full of activities and all kinds of busyness. We cover up our insecurity with achievement and the affirmation of others. We escape the stress and sadness of life through entertainment and excess.

But research shows that the problem with all that avoiding and numbing is that while it dulls the pain for a moment, in the long run, it leaves us more broken, addicted, detached, and distanced from the people we love, including God.

So how, then, is victory possible in the middle of our struggle?

Paul is clear about what victory is not. It's not found in making more money, curating a comfortable life, or powering through in our own strength. He doesn't say we are more than conquerors through having a spouse or having kids or pushing through in our own strength or sidestepping weakness.

Victory, Paul says, is the unshakable assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God. As we navigate the tensions of life, this reality keeps us tethered to the one who conquered sin, Satan, and death—not by avoiding suffering but by entering it. Jesus shows us that

the road to victory runs straight through the cross and that true victory is not the absence of suffering but the presence of love that will not let us go.

That is the victorious life.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for promising to hold us in the ever-present embrace of Your love. Help us understand that true victory isn't found in the absence of trouble but in knowing Your love in the midst of it. Holy Spirit, teach us how to be more than conquerors through You. In Jesus's name, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- How does Jesus's willingness to enter suffering—rather than avoid it—reshape your definition of strength?
- When life feels heavy, what are your most common ways of numbing, distracting, or avoiding pain?
- Where might God be inviting you to stay present rather than escape?

December 22

With Us in Our Becoming

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

And [Jesus] said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."
—Matthew 4:19 ESV

Why do you say, O Jacob,
    and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord,
    and my right is disregarded by my God"?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
    the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.
—ISAIAH 40:27–31 ESV

CONSIDER THIS

Have you ever noticed the way Jesus calls the first disciples?

He doesn't start with a lecture. He doesn't hand them a five-year plan. He doesn't demand they believe before they belong.

He simply says, "Come. Follow me."

And then He makes a promise: "I will make you."

That's the part I need to hear again and again: "*I* will make you."

The journey of becoming can feel like failure if you expect transformation to be instant. But discipleship is almost always slower than we want and a lot less linear than we'd like to think.

Some of us are harsh with ourselves because we confuse being unfinished with being unfaithful.

But Jesus doesn't seem offended by process. He expects it.

The disciples were ordinary men with ordinary habits and ordinary blind spots. And Jesus didn't wait for them to get it together before inviting them to be His disciples.

He called them in the middle of their workday. He joined them on their boats. He walked with them at a human pace. He taught them, corrected them, fed them, and forgave them.

"Immanuel" means "God with us" not only at the finish line but in the messy middle. With us as we learn to pray. With us as we unlearn cynicism. With us as we practice forgiveness, again. With us as we try and fail and try again.

Your becoming is not a solo project. You are not the one responsible for manufacturing your own transformation. Yes, there is effort. Yes, there are practices. But beneath it all is a deeper reality: Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, is the one who makes.

And this reframes the way we hold our limitations. Your weaknesses are not proof that God can't use you; they're often the very place His apprenticeship takes root. He's not just inviting you to believe true things—He's inviting you to become a certain kind of person.

The kind of person who has been with Jesus.

PRAYER

Jesus, thank You for meeting me where I am, as I am. Help me follow You at Your pace. Free me from the pressure to make myself into something. And, Holy Spirit, when I'm discouraged by the process, remind me: You are the one who makes. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where do you feel discouraged in your becoming right now? Name it without shame.
- Sometimes we confuse doing more with being close to Jesus. What would it look like to just be with Him today?
- In light of the reality that Jesus is more committed to our transformation than we are, what is one small "follow Me" step Jesus is inviting you to take today?

December 23

With Us in the Waiting

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. —Romans 8:22–25

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
—Hebrews 11:1 ESV

CONSIDER THIS

We don't drift toward waiting well. It requires steadfast resolve to remain softhearted and openhanded when you don't yet have what you want, what you need, what you've prayed for, or what you thought would have come by now.

Romans 8 doesn't romanticize waiting. It tells the truth: We hope for what we do not yet have. Which means waiting always includes an ache. If there's no ache, it isn't waiting. It's simply time passing.

And Scripture gives that ache a name: patience. Not passive resignation. Not spiritual numbness. Patience. Patience as endurance. Patience as courage. Patience as faith that refuses to close in on itself.

Immanuel matters here because waiting can make you feel alone. The longer the silence stretches, the more you start narrating absence: God must not be paying attention. God must be late. God must be disappointed. God must have forgotten.

And here is where waiting becomes holy: not when it gets easier, but when it becomes a place where we practice presence. Not just God's presence with us, but our presence with God—staying, returning, praying again, hoping again, refusing to numb our longing.

If hope is the ability to live toward a future you cannot yet see, then waiting is the practice of staying tender while you do.

Today you may not receive the thing you're waiting for. But you are offered something just as real: a God who waits with you. A Savior who knows what it is to live between promise and fulfillment. A Spirit who groans with you when words run out.

PRAYER

Jesus, thank You for interceding on my behalf, especially when I don't know what to pray. Waiting is hard, and the ache feels real. When silence stretches long, keep my heart soft and my hands open. Holy Spirit, fill me afresh with Your patience that empowers me to endure. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- What's something you're waiting for right now?
- What story have you been tempted to tell yourself about God in the waiting?
- Practice: Place your hand on your chest and pray, "God with me." Sit with that for one minute.

December 24

With Us in Fear

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."
—John 14:1-7

CONSIDER THIS

"Do not let your hearts be troubled."

These words from Jesus to His disciples are spoken right into the visceral experience of uncertainty, confusion, and fear. Judas, the one they had spent the last three years doing life with, has just betrayed Jesus and, by extension, all the disciples.

Imagine, the person you thought you knew—like really knew—does the very thing you were most afraid of. He hands over the one you left everything for, the one you pushed all the chips of your life into the center of the table for. The one you believed would bring freedom from oppression and power over those inflicting merciless injustice.

In trading Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, Judas sets in motion Jesus's capture and crucifixion, unleashing in the eleven remaining disciples a state of utter disorientation.

And it's into that disorientation that Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled."

If I was one of those disciples, I'd be wondering, *How can He say such a thing*? At first glance it seems

insensitive— tone-deaf, even. How can You tell me not to be troubled when the Rabbi I rearranged my entire life for, the one I believed was the Messiah—the one who would never die—is now saying He'll only be with me a little while longer?

I'd start replaying every interaction I'd ever had with Jesus, wondering: *Was it all for nothing? Was any of it real?*

Disorientation pulls our hearts in a million different directions. When our bodies are flooded with thoughts and emotions that make us feel unstable and insecure, we're tempted to reach for whatever seems to offer the most security and comfort the fastest.

This is when Thomas chimes in, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Like Thomas, when everything is headed in the seemingly opposite direction of our hopes and expectations, we reach for certainty. I know I do. Jesus tells His disciples that He's going somewhere they can't follow Him quite yet, and instead of giving them a map with exact coordinates, He gives them a compass. He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Might this be the truth that protects our hearts from being troubled?

And, if so, how do we actually begin to follow Jesus's words and keep our hearts from being troubled?

We behold Him.

We fix our gaze on Him as the giver and sustainer of life.

Just a couple of chapters later, Jesus tells His grief-stricken disciples again that He is about to leave them. But in the midst of their grief, He gives them a promise: the promise of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who will come and guide them and make known the way of Jesus. Alongside this promise is Jesus's famous proclamation: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (16:33).

Jesus keeps it real: We aren't promised a comfortable, easy life free from struggle or suffering. But we are promised a way to experience peace in the midst of trouble.

Jesus says He's telling us these things so that in Him we may have peace. Jesus knows that in the face of disorientation, grief, and trouble, we're going to need peace.

That kind of peace that can only be located in Him.

The illusion of control and certainty is just that: an illusion. Jesus wants us to experience peace, and He has given us the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit to help us remember and remain in His presence, which is His peace. His presence—the presence that promises to never leave or forsake us, the presence available to us right here and right now—is the peace that protects our hearts from getting stuck in fear and trouble.

PRAYER

Jesus, You are not just the Prince of Peace. You are peace. When my heart is troubled and the way ahead feels unclear, help me fix my gaze on You. I release my need for certainty and receive the peace You offer. By Your Spirit, steady my heart, guide my steps, and remind me that You are with me. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- Where in your life right now do things feel uncertain, unstable, or out of alignment with what you hoped for?
- What questions are surfacing for you in this season, questions that sound a bit like Thomas's: "How can I know the way?" Notice that Jesus does not shut Thomas down when he asks. Jesus responds. Take a moment to write down your questions and offer them to God in prayer. Then take some time to wait and listen for His response.

December 25

God Is Here

CONSECRATION

Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you. (Eph. 5:14)

Jesus, I belong to you. I lift up my heart to you.
I set my mind on you. I fix my eyes on you.
I offer my body to you as a living sacrifice.
Jesus, we belong to you. Praying in the name of
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

THE WORD OF THE LORD

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
—John 1:14

CONSIDER THIS

After weeks of waiting and days spent discipling our attention to behold Jesus, here we are: Merry Christmas!

Today is the day when all of Advent crescendos into the collective cry that echoes across nations and

generations: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

In the early church, this proclamation was taken so seriously that Christians were instructed not to kneel on Christmas Day. Kneeling was the posture of repentance and waiting. Standing was the posture of resurrection and joy. The body itself was taught to proclaim the good news: God has come. We are no longer pleading for His presence. We are standing in it.

And so the invitation of this book continues.

As the church moves from Advent into Epiphany, the question gently shifts from "Will God come?" to "Will we keep our eyes fixed on Him?"

Jesus does not come to be admired but to be followed.

He is the way—showing us how to walk through the world in love, humility, and faithfulness.

He is the truth—revealing what is real when competing voices clamor for our allegiance.

He is the life—the sustaining presence of God that animates us from the inside out.

So today, we stand—not because everything is resolved but because God is here. And tomorrow, and in the days that follow, we will keep beholding. We will keep learning to recognize Jesus as the way beneath our feet, the truth that steadies our hearts, and the life that carries us forward into the world He so loves.

The light has come.

Let us walk in it.

PRAYER

Jesus, today we stand in the joy of Your coming. Thank You for making Your home among us and in us and lighting our way with Your presence. As we move into the days ahead, keep our eyes fixed on You—the way beneath our feet, the truth that steadies our hearts, the life that empowers us to abide in You. The light has come. Teach us to walk in it. Amen.

Silence and stillness before God (two minutes)

JOURNAL PROMPTS

- If you're able, take a moment to stand. Notice your body. Your breath. Your groundedness.
- What does it stir in you to hear the words "God is here"—not as a hope but as a reality?
- As Advent ends, what would it look like to carry this posture of attention into the days ahead?
- Take a moment to reflect on the past few weeks. What has the Lord revealed to you, stirred in you, or gently reshaped in your heart? Write down anything that comes to mind, big or small. Record your reflections in the margins of this page or in your journal as a way of remembering and giving thanks.

Part IV Conversation Guide



Beholding Jesus: Immanuel

Focus Entries: #19, #20, #22
Focus Verses: Isaiah 40:27-31; Matthew 4:19; John 1:1-4; Colossians 3:17
Theme Verse: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."*
—John 1:1-4

DISCUSSION

1. In the incarnation, God steps into our ordinary lives. Shelbi writes in day 20 that "Advent reminds us that God's arrival wasn't a spectacle staged on a platform. It happened in the ordinary, easily overlooked places: a teenage girl's body, a carpenter's home, a feeding trough." How can we cultivate a posture of awareness so that we see Jesus in the easily overlooked parts of our own lives?
2. We sometimes find ourselves caught up in striving during Advent trying to make our celebrations just right. We can do the same with our spiritual lives, striving to make

ourselves good followers of Jesus. Shelbi reminds us that "you are not the one responsible for manufacturing your own transformation." Do you struggle with this idea? How does knowing that Jesus is the one who transforms us take the pressure off?

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Shelbi points out that "the incarnation means life is available now" through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. How does God's willingness to dwell not only with us but within us shape your view of Him? Have you considered that His desire to live in you shows how much He likes you and wants to be with you?
2. "The incarnation means that God is not distant from or disinterested in our lives." How can meditating on the incarnation encourage us when we feel God is absent or uncaring? How can we incorporate the incarnation when we communicate the gospel to others, who might assume that God is not interested in them personally?
3. Shelbi writes, "Immanuel means God is with us not only at the finish line but in the messy middle." Are you comfortable inviting God into your messy middle, or is it difficult to accept that God receives you as you are, in process? How does God's willingness to meet you in your weaknesses help you reframe your limitations? How does knowing God is with you in your everyday life, even in small, mundane tasks, encourage you? What does His willingness to walk alongside us in the unremarkable day-to-day reveal about His character?

watch the accompanying videos from Shelbi here:



The Sower's Creed

Today,
I sow for a great awakening.

Today,
I stake everything on the promise of the Word of God.
I depend entirely on the power of the Holy Spirit.
I have the same mind in me that was in Christ Jesus.
Because Jesus is good news and Jesus is in me,
I am good news.

Today,
I will sow the extravagance of the gospel
everywhere I go and into everyone I meet.

Today,
I will love others as Jesus has loved me.

Today,
I will remember that the tiniest
seeds become the tallest trees;
that the seeds of today become the shade of tomorrow;
that the faith of right now becomes the future of
the everlasting kingdom.

Today,
We sow for a great awakening.