FROM THE MANGER

CONTRIBUTORS

WRITING

ERIKA MARKSBURY is mom to two wise and wonderful teenagers, and pastor at the First Baptist Church of McMinnville, a creative, progressive, thoughtful congregation. She earned her Ph.D. listening to birth stories and studying birth rituals, and remains fascinated by all the ways people make meaning.

EDITING

ARIANNE BRAITHWAITE LEHN is a parent, writer, artist, creator, and ordained minister with the Presbyterian Church (USA). She is the author of Ash and Starlight: Prayers for the Chaos and Grace of Daily Life. Arianne regularly writes at her Substack newsletter, Monday Manna. She and her family live in Chicagoland.

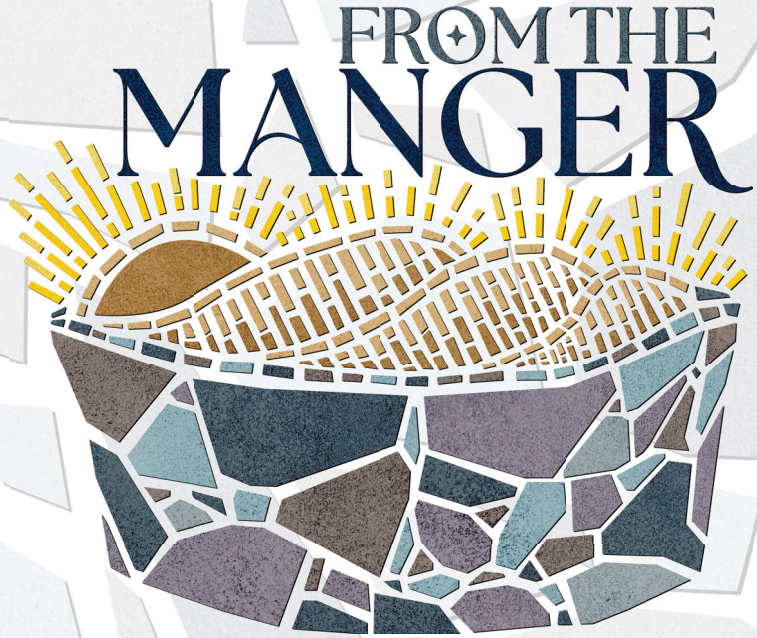
EDITING
director of product & operations

REBEKAH LOWE develops and cultivates Illustrated Ministry's ever growing library of resources. She earned a BA in Biblical Studies from Azusa Pacific University and served as the Director of Children's Ministry at Brentwood Presbyterian Church (USA) in Los Angeles, California. She resides in Austin, Texas with her husband and their two children.

LAYOUT
founder

ADAM WALKER CLEAVELAND is an artist, pastor, pastor's spouse, and father of four (two living). Adam is an ordained Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and after doing youth ministry for over 15 years, he founded Illustrated Ministry in 2015. He resides in Racine, Wisconsin with his wife and their two children.

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ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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CONTRIBUTORS

Writing: Erika Marksbury

Editing: Arianne Braithwaite Lehn, Rebekah Lowe

Director of Product & Operations: Rebekah Lowe

Founder: Adam Walker Cleaveland

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FROM THE MANGER

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FROM THE MANGER ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Hunger is a universal human experience, drawing attention to our most basic needs for food and nourishment and our more complex needs—peace, liberation, and meaning in this life. So, it's no wonder that the story of Jesus—the one who came to feed the hungry—begins, ends, and centers around food.

From the Manger gathers around the birth story in Luke 2, embracing the playful symbolism of a newborn Jesus being laid down to sleep in a feeding trough in a town called "House of Bread."

The *From the Manger Advent Devotional* invites you to reflect on the life-sustaining hope, peace, joy, and love Jesus brings and notice how the baby born in a bread town continues to feed a hungry world today.

Spend time each week reading the scripture and reflection. Ponder the provided questions or discuss them with someone in your home or your community.

We hope this resource will be a simple invitation into the Advent season and help create a memorable and meaningful Advent and Christmas season.

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ENDNOTES

1. Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 86.
2. Levine, *Light of the World*, 26.
3. Levine, *Light of the World*, 91.
4. Ibid., 91.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are some ways your family, your friend circle, or your faith community lives out the good news of Advent and Christmas?

What messages do you receive about scarcity? What messages do you receive about abundance? What in your own life affects how you understand these messages?

Can you name some ways "good news to the poor" is good news for you, regardless of what circumstances you are currently in?

How does Amy-Jill Levine's idea that "we do not need to wait until some far-flung future" resonate with you? What does salvation look, feel, or taste like where you are, right now?

What does returning to the story of a baby born in a bread box, in a town called, "House of Bread," mean for your understanding and celebration of Christmas this year?

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When Jesus feeds hungry crowds later in Luke's story, there are baskets of leftovers despite what looked like meager provisions at the start of the scene, and despite the disciples' fears and protests it would never be enough.

There is always more goodness to go around—whether that goodness comes in the form of Christmas cookies, baskets of loaves and fish, hope, or peace, or joy, or love. This season, may that goodness inspire our songs, sharing, and lives.

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The second comes from the synagogue, when Jesus begins his ministry, saying to those gathered: "I've got good news, joy for those who are hungry for relief, for release, for reason to hope again!" Jesus specifically names those who have been disempowered and dispossessed, letting them know God is with them and for them. This doesn't sit well with everyone who hears it, of course. But only because those who don't fit the categories he named also don't yet understand that good news for the poor is actually good news for everyone.

A society that keeps people stratified—some with plenty, some in poverty—doesn't serve either category or anybody in between. When those with the least are lifted up, everyone rises. We have been tricked into thinking we only do well when we can measure ourselves against others who have it worse off. But it's a false measure. When we are full, we know whether or not someone nearby is still hungry. We know the truth of God's world is abundance, not scarcity; cooperation, not competition.

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HOPE GROWS

ADVENT ONE

LUKE 2:1-7

In my small town, several churches share the responsibility of feeding folks. My Baptist church opens its doors for breakfast on Mondays and Fridays and then later on Fridays for dinner. The Presbyterians across the street take Wednesday mornings and Saturday evenings. Two blocks down, the combined Lutheran/Methodist congregation offers a big, hot Saturday morning breakfast spread. There's an Episcopal Church just over the creek; they serve dinner Monday through Friday. The Catholic Church invites people to come on Friday afternoons to receive a box filled with pantry staples, fresh fruits, and veggies. The Nazarenes at the other end of town have a similar program. A non-religious organization sets up in a parking lot on Sunday afternoons, serving a home-cooked meal to

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be enjoyed in the moment and a brown-bag meal to save for later. The Sikh temple one town over prepares giant weekly meals to share with anyone who comes: samosas and rice, curries simmering in seemingly endless pots, and a towering stack of to-go containers. And those are only the offerings I know about!

And here's the thing: my town isn't unique. Many faith traditions live out compassion and imagination for those who are hungry by holding feasts at the center of their practice. Many faith communities and other folks of goodwill seek to extend those feasts by inviting in those who are hungry.

Every time food is shared, every time a cup is poured for a stranger or friend, a kind of communion takes place: a remembrance of the sacred Source from whom all blessings flow—a nourishment, shared and care-full. Sometimes, this care tastes like bread and wine and is offered with words about being "broken for you," being "poured out for the forgiveness of sins." Sometimes, it tastes like spaghetti and salad and is offered with words like, "It's good to see you!" or "How's your sister doing?" or "Be sure and come back for

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We can read it in the Gospels as they unfold. And we can anticipate it tomorrow if we simply follow John the Baptist's instruction: share what you have with those in need."[4]

Advent is a journey through stories of folks sharing what they have: an innkeeper offers a private, safe space in the form of a stable and a manger; angels send out their joyful songs; shepherds share the wonder they've witnessed; a faithful elder bestows a meaningful blessing. Those offerings are here-and-now good news, gifts making community, connection, and celebration happen. People still hunger for food and for good news, but the bread box in the town called "House of Bread" has already begun to feed the world.

Telling this story, the author of Luke's gospel gives readers two big announcements. The first comes from the sky, when Jesus is born, and the angels call out to the shepherds: "We've got good news, joy for everyone!"

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Community meal sites are not a cure-all. No one—not the folks who come to receive food, not the folks who donate and prepare the food, not the folks who serve it—believes what's happening there is the answer to the problem of hunger. We know that in our small town, like in the world at large, there are systemic issues leading to food insecurity, and those must be tackled at systemic levels for everyone to eat healthily, regularly, and enough.

But while the systemic work is ongoing—while we lobby leaders at every level to ensure access to good quality nutrition for all—people need to eat. Community meal sites can be part of the answer to the hunger people feel right now, for food and for hope, for peace, for joy, for love.

Amy-Jill Levine explains, "for Jesus to be a savior and for the good news to be salvific, the Gospel says we do not need to wait until some far-flung future."[3] We can find it in the stories of our ancestors in faith.

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seconds."

While small towns and big cities around the world set tables for neighbors to come and feast, the story of Jesus' birth brings us to Bethlehem, a town whose name loudly calls out, "Are you hungry? Come here!" New Testament and Jewish Studies professor Amy-Jill Levine draws our attention to the layers of meaning baked into the nativity story. *Bethlehem*, she explains, literally translates to *house of bread.* Additionally, the manger, Levine points out, is "not just a bed of straw; it is a feeding trough."[1]

As a baby, Jesus is laid in his cradle like the straw feeding the animals; as an adult, he speaks of his body as food given for his friends. He witnesses the hunger of strangers, is moved by compassion, and finds ways to feed them. He instructs his disciples to feed those who journey alongside them, and when the disciples protest they don't have a way to get food, he doesn't tolerate their excuses. He was born in a bread box, in a bread town, and no matter where the rest of his life takes him, that earliest location never leaves Jesus' heart.

And when Jesus is not yet born, even

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before Mary made the journey to this *house of bread*, she senses a new fullness coming to be. When she learns she's pregnant—when she learns she and God are doing something impossible together—Mary sings of how God has "filled the hungry with good things." Her song gives voice to the wonder over how her own role in the story might be a precursor to other impossible hopes coming true: like the hope no one would go to bed hungry, the hope all might have what they need to thrive, the hope abundance would not be hoarded but shared. This Advent story draws us to the manger, the cradle of a baby who, like all babies, depends on others to feed and nourish him. But aren't we all, at any age, dependent on one another? For food, for care, for fullness of life?

Sometimes, the needs all around us can feel overwhelming. Hope is believing that, with compassion and imagination, things can get better. On a cold night, hope might taste like a warm bowl of soup ladled out by a friend. It might sound like the three-part harmony of a newborn's cry, a mama's whispers, a daddy's lullaby. It might look like this unlikely nativity

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GOOD NEWS HAS COME

CHRISTMAS

LUKE 2:10-12

The Christmas cookie exchange has become a tradition at the breakfast program at my church. Volunteers agree on a Monday or Friday date in late December, and on that day—in addition to preparing the usual menu of hard-boiled eggs, English muffins, cheese, and fruit—they come loaded down with tins of snickerdoodles and snowballs and frosted sugar cookies cut into shapes of stars and boots and Santa hats.

The line of guests out the door strikes fear in the hearts of the bakers, who worry there's no way they've made enough cookies to satisfy the hungry crowd. But it never fails: folks come excited, share in the sweet generosity, and leave feeling stuffed.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you wanted to share love in a tangible way with your community, what could you do?

When was a time you felt surrounded and upheld by love?

What story can you share from your younger years that still shapes who you are today?

What is a blessing you could speak to someone this season—friend or stranger—to remind them of how God lives through them?

How are you experiencing love, and how are you sharing it, this Advent?

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scene: a baby in a bread box, a reminder of the ways God comes to be right here with us—meeting us in our deep hunger, making a home in our humanness, and in all the ways we feed and are fed by one another.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you or someone you know needed food, where could you go? Do you know of options available nearby?

Describe a meal you have enjoyed sharing with others.

In what ways does food connect you to other people? To your history? To your faith?

How have you seen compassion and imagination come together to meet needs in your home, church, school, or community? How is having hunger met important to a sense of hope?

What do you hope for this Advent?

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disempowering many. That love inspires faith communities today to do the same.

What might be possible if we welcomed every child like that? And if, for those of us born long ago, we took the time to tell each other now: "In you, God's promises are coming true. Your hands offer food that nourishes. Your mouth speaks words that make change. Your body accompanies others, all of us journeying together. Through you, God's love is made real in the world."
Maybe this Advent, we can birth and bless each other anew into that kin-dom.



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new life with words of affirmation, those who name one another as God's presence, God's promise, for the world.

Baby Janie and baby Jesus were born into love—the care and connection binding us together with each other and God —and through them, people who once despaired found renewed and deepened communion.

Janie is too young to say what it meant to be welcomed like that—to be told she was longed for, prayed for; to be surrounded, in her earliest days, by folks who knew they could not protect her from everything but surely would, if it were possible; to embody a people's hope that life is ever-new, and God is ever-present.

But we know what the welcome did for Jesus. We have the stories. The same love spoken over him as a baby flowed from him as he grew, as he befriended, healed, shared, lived, and died. He saw each person for who they were, and had compassion for one and all. That love took the form of kind words, a healing touch, and baskets of bread and fish. That love gave shape to his prophetic challenge of a system privileging few and

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PEACE GROWS

ADVENT TWO

LUKE 2:8-16

Those Monday and Friday morning breakfasts were put on pause when COVID shut everything down for a while. Instead of inviting people to sit around tables and share food together, volunteers packaged meals and distributed them outdoors.

Early in the transition, they were making 70 breakfasts—enough to feed the same number of guests they were used to seeing. But a few weeks into the new routine, they noticed they couldn't give away all the meals they were making.

They started purchasing less food, packaging fewer bags. They heard some former guests had left town, but not enough to explain the drastic drop in numbers.

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Volunteers tried to get the word out that the program hadn't closed down, only shifted methods. Numbers stayed low.

When it became safe to gather again, and the breakfast welcomed people back indoors, it didn't take long to jump up to pre-pandemic crowd size. As they chatted, it became clear to volunteers that guests were not returning for the food. Many of them had managed to eat just fine in the intervening months.

They came back because they hungered for the companionship shared around tables. They hungered for someone to share with, someone to talk and listen to, someone to speak peace over their troubled days, into their troubled hearts. It felt like too much to ask for from someone handing out brown bag meals to a line of folks outside, but sitting down together again, they reentered a space of speaking and being heard, knowing and being known. That was what they'd been hungry for.

This Advent, if we pan out from the picture of Jesus in a manger, take a bigger view than the bread box in a bread town, we might see the night sky, all lit up. If we leave

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Eddie, exhausted and elated, beamed at her and at their community, as they soaked up all the love.

When Simeon greeted Jesus in the temple, it wasn't as a long-time friend of the family. And yet something deep in the old man's soul knew this baby. When he spoke, the new parents recognized this stranger...they sensed a shared history and hope with him. In his prophetic words, Mary heard her own song; Joseph remembered his own dream. They all yearned for freedom, for release from dire circumstances binding them. Each of them saw God's promised salvation in this little one they took turns holding.

Simeon had endured much sorrow. His people suffered under an oppressive regime. Though just one person, he spoke for more than himself—he spoke on behalf of all who longed for a new world. Cradling Jesus, he could see it. He spoke both prophecy and blessing.

I wonder if Simeon appears in this story to tell us who Jesus is and to show us who we all can be: those who hope on behalf of the whole community, those who welcome each

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Friends made predictions about the baby's gender and offered their own names as suggestions for consideration. Church knitters asked about favorite colors and purposefully crafted in anticipation of this little one.

Baby Janie was born in March. Mayah and Eddie kept her home until the worst of winter had passed. They then swaddled her tightly and brought her to meet the people who had been waiting so long.

Her arrival was maybe the most exciting thing to ever happen at that breakfast. People cheered, raising glasses of juice and coffee to toast her blessed beginning. They passed her around and held her gently. Some whispered nonsense into her tiny ears. Some spoke loudly about her fine parentage so that Mayah and Eddie could overhear. One man, long estranged from his children, shed a few tears. One woman said she needed to call her grandkids; it had been too long.

During all of this, Janie did what babies do—she squirmed, fussed, grinned, and made wide eyes at each new person who welcomed her to the world. And Mayah and

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the stable, where the baby's crying and the cattle's lowing fill our ears, we might hear the news sung from the heavens: "Glory to God, and on earth, peace!"

And as much as they would have been hungry to hear it, anyone else in that scene might have been confused by this message. Maybe that night was peaceful—maybe all was calm, all was bright—but, as Amy Jill Levine warns, "Any story set in the reign of King Herod is a story of political intrigue and threats to life."[2] Herod's unrelenting cruelty and indiscriminate violence are infamous, and new parents surely celebrated the births of their children joyfully while at the same time worrying for the world they were born into. Those who heard the angels' proclamations might well have replied, "Peace? Where? When? *Please!*"

Maybe the angels' song was less a report of fact and more a declaration of intent. Maybe it was, on a grand scale, in the sky, the same gesture the adult Jesus and his disciples would offer on a small scale, at each home they entered. A way of saying: "We intend only good for you. We pray for peace within you and all around you."

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Folks were accustomed to the empire parading through the streets flanked by force, soldiers getting their own way or taking it. They were used to "peace" enforced by the silencing of any opposition to the powers that were. But the kin-dom these angels are messengers of came knocking on doors, sitting at tables, sharing meals. Against the empire's rhetoric of hierarchy and scarcity, God's kin-dom teaches equality and abundance: one table, around which we all gather; one bread, broken for everyone. Sharing a meal with one another reminds us we share a world with one another.

The angels sang good news, but peace isn't achieved by a proclamation from the sky. Peace is what happens when everyone treats each other, themselves, and the world kindly. It is the product of conversation and compassion, the intentional pursuit of one another's well-being and the well-being of all of creation.

Some people go to bed hungry every night, but not because there's not enough food. *There is more than enough for all of us.* Disasters like floods and droughts create disruptions

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LOVE GROWS

ADVENT FOUR

LUKE 2:25-35

Mayah and Eddie were regulars at the community meal sites. They had been houseless for four years, but when she became pregnant, they qualified for special assistance. Before the baby was born, they moved into an apartment. With that piece of their lives secured, they were both able to find jobs.

Their hours working meant they didn't spend much time with their old community. They became less frequent at the Monday and Friday breakfasts. We rarely saw them at the shelter once they had their own place. But they stopped by to visit, to give people a chance to *"ooooh"* and *"ahhhh"* over Mayah's growing belly. Folks who served meals dished up extra helpings for the mother-to-be, with comments about her "eating for two."

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you were asked to host a joyful feast, what would be on the menu? How would you decorate the table? Who would be invited?

Can you remember a time when joy provoked you to generosity? Can you share that story?

Why do we sometimes keep our joy to ourselves? What holds us back from sharing?

What is the relationship between justice and joy?

What is bringing you joy—in your own life, in your church, in your community, in our world—this Advent?

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in access to food. Injustices like poverty and genocide use enforced starvation as a weapon. Withholding food is a tactic of war; ensuring its just distribution is peacemaking.

On the night Jesus was born, on the ground, people (and animals!) made peace by making space for one another and tending to each other's urgent needs. In the sky, angels sang of the world as it could be. On these Advent nights, we can make peace by offering care and nourishment to our own bodies, to the bodies of those around us, to the body of our world, and by receiving the same back again. And we can keep singing.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

If you were to sing a song of the way the world could be, what would it sound like?

Describe a time when you learned more about someone by sharing a meal with them.

What words, songs, or stories of your faith bring you peace?

Where—in your own life, in your community, in our world—can you identify a longing for peace now?

How will you cultivate peace this Advent? How can food be a part of your peace efforts?

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into community echoed from Zacchaeus's life into the lives of all those around him. Together, they all were restored.

Zacchaeus's reparations were one way Mary's song, and the song of the angels, came true—a toppling of the system in the direction of justice; a true peacemaking. How might those Advent songs echo in our own lives? How might the shepherd's joyful journey inspire our own generosity?



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Generosity and joy are deeply woven together. Joy—when you feel so thankful you could burst with excitement and gratitude—is possible alone, but much deeper when shared in community. Generosity is an expression of joy; generosity also creates and magnifies joy.

Think of the shepherds as they made their way home from the manger: the joy of what they had witnessed motivated their journey. The ways they give voice to that joy—singing praises and giving glory to God—magnifies it and makes it known to all who hear them. Their celebration becomes a generous sharing of their joy, enfolding more and more people, drawing them into the good news of Jesus' birth.

And during his ministry, the generosity of Jesus' presence—his welcome, acceptance, attention, and care—provoked generosity in others. Zacchaeus had long been criticized and judged by his community. Jesus, though, sees and calls out Zacchaeus from hiding and invites him to play host. That chosenness thrilled him so much that his joy spilled out in justice and generosity, multiple times over! The joy of being noticed and folded

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JOY GROWS

ADVENT THREE

LUKE 2:8-20

Lesley has long been a mother figure among the folks who come in for shelter on Friday nights. If someone is shivering, she finds a blanket to wrap them in, encouraging them to sit still while she fetches a cup of hot coffee. If there's a scuffle over who's next in line for the shower, she steps in to remind both parties everybody has to wait and everybody gets a turn. She's a guest, not a volunteer, but those lines blur a little. She knows everybody; everybody listens to her. Sometimes, they grumble when she tells them what to do, but usually, they follow her instructions. She's been around long enough they trust she knows what's best.

One summer night, she came into the shelter a bit later than most folks, carrying her usual gear on her back, plus a grocery bag

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in each hand. She headed to the dinner line and nodded at the spread of sandwiches and salads.

"Have most people been through?" she asked.

"I think so," I told her, "at least for first helpings."

She looked pleased. "Good," she said and beckoned me closer so she could whisper, "I've got a treat, but I want to make sure they eat their meal first." She tilted her grocery bags toward me so I could see—each one held a giant tub of ice cream. Chocolate fudge swirl in her left hand, strawberry in her right.

I'm not sure if there is an official, universal dessert taxonomy, but here's the way I understand the categories. Brownies and cookies are year-round comfort food. Fruit bowls and cobblers immerse you in the bounty of particular seasons. Cakes imply a festive occasion. Pie means somebody cares about you. Candy is indulgence. And ice cream—ice cream is pure bliss. It's messy, always threatening to melt off the cone before you can lick it all up. It's silly, with its bright colors or chunks of extra sweetness

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folded in. It's accessible; even people whose teeth haven't come in yet, or people whose teeth have all fallen out, can enjoy it.

Lesley tucked the bags under the serving table. She didn't covet the credit. She'd just gotten a paycheck, and it was summer, and the folks at the shelter were her community. She wanted to share some joy. She wanted to watch grown men become giddy kids again, see care-worn women treat themselves to something good, offer troubled teens a simple pleasure.

I went to get a scoop. Lesley went to find a mat which would be her bed for the night. I came back and pulled the tubs to the tabletop, and a few folks saw and hopped into the line. "Ice cream!" they cheered. "I scream, you scream!" They announced the goods to the rest of the room. One by one, they came—excitedly, shyly. I asked what flavor they'd prefer. "Chocolate! No, strawberry! No, choc—could I...could I have a little of both?" Lesley grinned as she watched it all unfold, witnessing people's postures loosen, seeing their smiles spread, hearing them tell stories of the last time they'd had ice cream...

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