

MAYA ANGELOU



AND THE
FREEDOM POETRY
OF ADVENT



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"I'm always amazed when people walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already? You already got it?' I'm working at it, which means that I try to be kind and fair and generous and respectful and courteous to every human being."

+ Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928. In 1965, working as a journalist in Ghana, she met Malcolm X, and decided to return to the United States to help him establish his Organization of African-American Unity – but only a few days after she arrived, he was assassinated. A few years later, she agreed to work with Martin Luther King Jr. – but then he, too, was killed, on her 40th birthday. Angelou fell into a depression.

Some friends recommended her to an editor at Random House, saying she should write an autobiography – but Angelou repeatedly refused. Then her friend, the writer James Baldwin, suggested a creative strategy to the editor: call her one more time, Baldwin said, and say you're calling to tell her that you'll stop bothering her, and that it's probably just as well that she's refused, because it's terribly difficult to write an autobiography that's also good literature. The plan worked like a charm: Angelou immediately agreed to take on the challenge.

On writing the book, she later said, "Once I got into it I realized I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass – the slave narrative – speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural, always saying 'I' meaning 'we.'" That first autobiography became *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969. Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” It’s the season of actively waiting and preparing for Jesus to be born, for God’s Word made flesh to come into the world.



The Christian year begins with the season of Advent, and this way of beginning is itself significant. You might think the year would begin with the trumpets of Easter, or the softness of Christmas Eve, or the fires of Pentecost – but on the contrary, we begin in the shadows of despair, war, sorrow, and hate. For it’s precisely there that the God of grace will arrive, and accordingly, it’s precisely there that God’s church is called to light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Maya Angelou is an Advent poet extraordinaire, in the sense that she often stands in the shadows and writes of the light. She boldly insists on blessedness and freedom, even as she confronts – with both candor and wit – the pain and injustice of the world. In this Advent devotional, we let scripture and Angelou’s poetry be our guides, together pointing us toward weekly practices that can help deepen and enrich our experience of the season – a perfect way to prepare for the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christmas day.

So grab your favorite Bible and Angelou’s *The Complete Poetry* (the poems can also be found online). Carve out some space and time for reflection, and remember that, for Angelou, “I” often means “we.” Night has fallen, and God is coming. The question is whether we’ll have the presence of mind and heart to notice, and to rejoice – and sing – when morning comes.

WEEK ONE HOPE

LIGHT

One Candle

SING

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
"Come Ye Disconsolate"



READ

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. + Isaiah 64:1

*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.
+ Mark 13:33*

Angelou's poem, "A Plagued Journey" (*The Complete Poetry*, p. 193).

REFLECT

Particularly during Advent, Christians are called to dwell in the shadows. After all, it's in the dark that we light candles, since that's where they'll do the most good. With this in mind, instead of simply "lighting a candle of hope," first turn toward specific shadows of hopelessness in our lives, in our neighbors' lives, and around the world. With Angelou, remember that hope and despair often ebb and flow with our days, and that many people struggle with sorrow and depression. Then keep watch, strike a match, pray, and sing.

PRAY

God of light and hope, of darkness and dawn, be with us in the shadows, even and especially in the valley of the shadow of death. Show us the way, and let us be lanterns of hope for others. Keep us awake and alert to your coming. Tear open the heavens; let the mountains of despair quake at your presence. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.

PRACTICES

- » Light a candle. Say a prayer. Breathe in hope; breathe out hope.
- » Call or connect with a relative or friend who lives far away, and sing his or her favorite Christmas carol together.
- » Conversation starters: In your most difficult times, what gives you hope? What signs of hope, near or far, have you seen this week?
- » More light: Read "Prayer" by Maya Angelou, and "Hope is the thing with feathers" by Emily Dickinson.
- » Many nonprofits do work that boils down to giving people hope, from Amnesty International to mental health organizations to refugee advocates. Choose one, set aside an hour to research them, and find out how you can help. Give the gift of hope!
- » Particularly in an age of pandemic, hope can be hard to come by – and creation can be a source of solace. Get out and up as high as you can: on a rooftop, or a hilltop, or a mountaintop. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..."



- » Wake up early one morning this week, wait in the darkness, and welcome the dawn, that universal sign of hope. Think of this as a time for mindfulness, of “keeping alert” for God’s presence.

WEEK TWO PEACE

LIGHT

Two Candles

SING

“Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”
“Down By the Riverside”
“Peace Like a River”



READ

A voice cries out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of God shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of God has spoken.” + Isaiah 40:3-5

Angelou’s poem, “Amazing Peace” (*The Complete Poetry*, p. 283).

REFLECT

Alongside the candle of hope, this week we light a candle of peace in the midst of a war-torn, polarized world. Strife is everywhere. But God's peace – God's shalom – is more than just the "absence of war," as Angelou insists; it's "true Peace. / A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies." Where do we most need this harmony today? Where in your personal life, in your community's life, in our planet's life? What would peace look like – and how are we being called to help make it?



PRAY

God of shalom, we pray for our hearts, our homes, and our world so full of war and rumors of war. Give us the wisdom and courage to be peacemakers, to "come the way of friendship." Show us the way to prepare for your coming, to make the rough places plain, to help create a lasting shalom in your world, a peace "louder than the explosion of bombs." Come, Prince of Peace, come. Amen.

PRACTICES

- » Light two candles. Say a prayer. Breathe in peace; breathe out peace.
- » Challenge yourself to be a peacemaker today. Identify a strained relationship, and take a concrete step toward reconciliation. Send a card, reach out, or call.
- » Conversation starters: What does what Angelou calls, "true Peace" actually look like? What are the primary obstacles we face in building a peaceful world? How can we create or lengthen a "halting of hate time" in our own lives and hearts?

- » More light: Read “A Brave and Startling Truth” by Maya Angelou, and “Making the House Ready for the Lord” by Mary Oliver.
- » Connect with someone who belongs to another religion, and wish them best wishes for the holidays they celebrate, or in any case for a happy and healthy New Year.
- » Get out into creation, and visit the most peaceful spot you know. Savor God’s peace, and watch for God’s glory.
- » Peace can often be found when we listen closely to our feelings. Many people use an “If Feelings Could Talk” chart to help figure out what’s happening emotionally, and what next steps might make most sense. Sadness might be telling me I need to cry. Loneliness, that I need connection. Resentment, that I need to forgive. Emptiness, that I need some creative time. Happiness, that I need to say “thank you.” Anger, that I need to check in with my boundaries. Stress, that I need some Sabbath. Try an intentional “If Feelings Could Talk” conversation with family or friends, with or without a chart: *What are you feeling? What next steps make sense?*
- » Pick a day this week, or part of a day, for a silent, unplugged retreat: no screens or devices, no speaking, no problem solving. Just pure, rejuvenating peace.



WEEK THREE JOY



LIGHT

Three Candles



SING

"Joy to the World" (yes, it's an Advent hymn!)

"My Lord, What a Morning"

"Mary Don't You Weep" (check out the version by Aretha Franklin, and the one by Bruce Springsteen!)

READ

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with her arm; she has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. She has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped her servant Israel, in remembrance of her mercy, according to the promise she made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever." + Luke 1:46-55

Angelou's poem, "Just Like Job" (*The Complete Poetry*, p. 168).

REFLECT

Alongside the candles of hope and peace, this week we light a candle of joy in the midst of a world full of sorrow. Some call joy “the secret of the Gospel,” since even the greatest faith, or hope, or peace, or love – if it lacks a sense of joy, it is not yet fully alive. As Angelou put it: “Joy is a freedom,” a force that itself helps a person find liberation. Can we sing a song of joy, a song of freedom, even in the midst of the shadows of sorrow?

PRAY

God of delight, God of celebration, God of good news of great joy for all people – we pray for your world so full of sorrows. Let us weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. Most of all, let us sing with Mary of how you delight in lifting up the lowly, scattering the proud, and filling the hungry with good things. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.

PRACTICES

- » Light three candles. Say a prayer. Breathe in joy; breathe out joy.
- » Each day this week, write down ten things for which you are grateful, ten things – large or small – that give you joy. Keep a running list (no repeats!), and read it each morning. Notice the joy that gratitude creates! To get your wheels turning, a few prompts: A strength of mine I’m thankful for is... Something wonderful I/we have that money can’t buy is... Something funny I’m grateful for is... Something in nature I’m thankful for is... A memory I’m grateful for is... A current challenge I’m grateful for is...
- » Conversation starters: Angelou says, “Joy is a freedom.” What does joy free you to do or to be? What’s the difference between joy and happiness?

- » More light: Read “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou, and “Annunciation” by Denise Levertov.
- » “Just Like Job” is written in the style of a psalm of lament: it begins in anguish, and ends in joy. Create your own psalm of lament, either as a poem, a song, a drawing, or a collage. What breaks your heart? And what gives you courage?
- » Pick the clearest night, and walk through a neighborhood with Christmas lights – and plenty of stars. Listen for an angel whispering good news, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!” + Luke 2:10
- » Recruit a group of singers and go (physically distanced) caroling outside. Or gather with those in your pandemic bubble and sing the group’s favorites, sitting around a “welcome table.”

WEEK FOUR LOVE



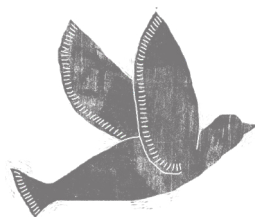
LIGHT

Four Candles

SING

“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”

“Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow”



READ

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit...

+ Luke 1:39-41

Angelou's poem, "Love's Exquisite Freedom," published as an art book illustrated by Edward Burne-Jones (Welcome Books, 2011). The poem also appears online under the title, "Touched by an Angel."

REFLECT

Alongside the candles of hope, peace, and joy, this week we light a candle of love in the midst of the shadows of hate, indifference, and what Angelou calls "the chains of fear." Rancor and ruin seem to rule the day. And yet the greatest commandment of all is to love God with everything we've got, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Angelou insists, "it is only love / which sets us free." How can we make this liberating love more manifest in our everyday lives?

PRAY

God of love, fill us with your Spirit of courage and liberty. When we are tempted by hatred, let us sow love. When we encounter hate, let us sow love. And when we witness or receive the gift of love, let us recognize your presence, leap for joy, and boldly, bravely, freely sow love all the more. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

PRACTICES

- » Light four candles. Say a prayer. Breathe in love; breathe out love.
- » Handwrite a "love letter" to someone who's made a difference in your life.

- » Conversation starters: What image is for you the perfect illustration of “hate”? Can love overcome hate? What (specifically!) makes you feel loved?
- » More light: Read “In and Out of Time” by Maya Angelou, and “Love (III)” by George Herbert.
- » It is sometimes said that “justice is what love looks like in public.” Contribute time, talent, or treasure to a just cause this week – and do it in a spirit of love.
- » With family or friends, try this: take some greeting cards (or index cards), and write one name from the group on the top of each card. Pass them around, so that everyone can write one thing they love about that person (be sure to disguise your handwriting!). Then play a game guessing who wrote what – and put the finished cards in the Christmas tree!
- » Blessed with good news, Mary traveled some distance to go and see Elizabeth. Whom would you go to see? Carve out some time to connect with them this week, and let them know how much you love and appreciate them.



CHRISTMAS EVE/DAY



LIGHT

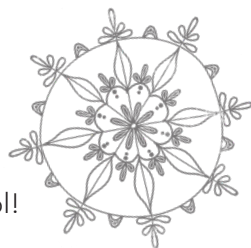
Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

SING

Have each person choose a favorite Christmas carol!

“Go Tell It On the Mountain”

“Silent Night”



READ

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. + Luke 2:1-7

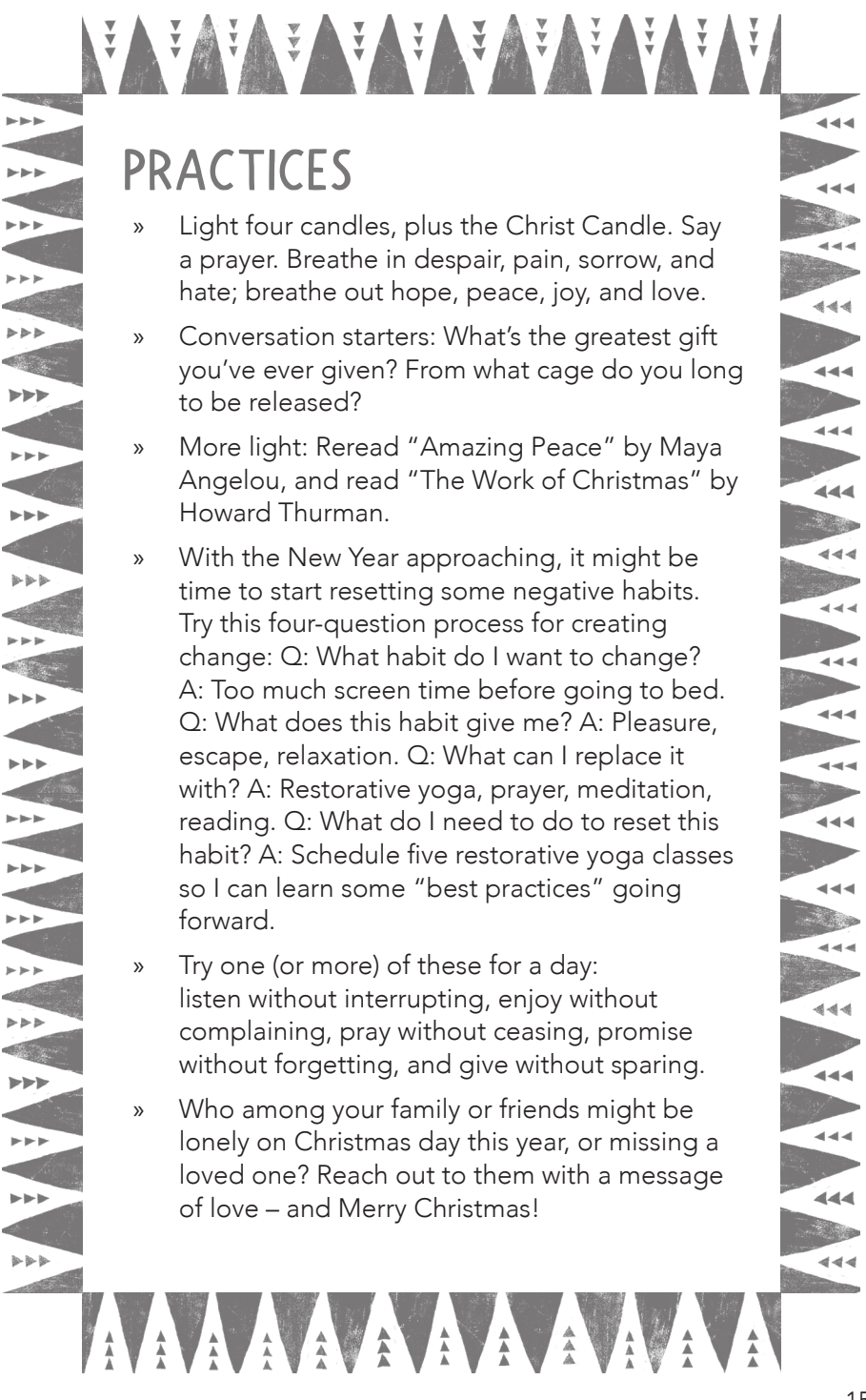
Angelou's poem, "Caged Bird" (*The Complete Poetry*, p. 189).

REFLECT

Alongside the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, tonight we light the Christ Candle as we make our way to the manger. Tonight is just a few days from the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. Here in the shadows, yet bathed in light, Jesus is born: resplendent, but poor, in a forgotten, backwater town; host of all things, but with nowhere to lay his head; gloriously free, but caught in the cage of the emperor's registration, and King Herod's murderous jealousy. In other words, Jesus meets us where we are, the better to shepherd us to freedom.

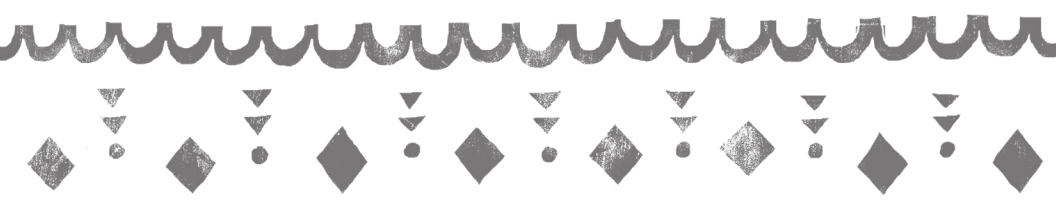
PRAY

God of hope, peace, joy, and love; God of Christmas morning; God of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi, the powerful and the dispossessed: we thank you and praise you for being a God of the shadows. We thank you and praise you for bringing hope where there is despair, peace where there is conflict, joy where there is sorrow, and love where there is hate or indifference. Give us the grace and wisdom to follow you and do the same. Thank you for being a God of freedom, who gives us a song to sing, and who will finally free us from every cage. Give us the courage and boldness to follow you into a new, dawning day. Thank you for coming to dwell with us, to live with us, and to love us back to life. Come, Jesus, come!



PRACTICES

- » Light four candles, plus the Christ Candle. Say a prayer. Breathe in despair, pain, sorrow, and hate; breathe out hope, peace, joy, and love.
- » Conversation starters: What's the greatest gift you've ever given? From what cage do you long to be released?
- » More light: Reread "Amazing Peace" by Maya Angelou, and read "The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman.
- » With the New Year approaching, it might be time to start resetting some negative habits. Try this four-question process for creating change: Q: What habit do I want to change? A: Too much screen time before going to bed. Q: What does this habit give me? A: Pleasure, escape, relaxation. Q: What can I replace it with? A: Restorative yoga, prayer, meditation, reading. Q: What do I need to do to reset this habit? A: Schedule five restorative yoga classes so I can learn some "best practices" going forward.
- » Try one (or more) of these for a day: listen without interrupting, enjoy without complaining, pray without ceasing, promise without forgetting, and give without sparing.
- » Who among your family or friends might be lonely on Christmas day this year, or missing a loved one? Reach out to them with a message of love – and Merry Christmas!



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS

