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# BLESSED IS THE SEASON WHICH ENGAGES THE WHOLE WORLD IN A CONSPIRACY OF LOVE."

— Hamilton Wright Mabie

# **COSTLY LOVE**

#### READ

1 JOHN 3:18

Christmas is all about togetherness and no one understands that more than the Hallmark Channel. As everyone who is also tracking the Countdown to Christmas with the Hallmark Christmas app knows (please don't tell anyone), nothing complicated is ever supposed to happen. In a movie that could be called "Christmas, Christmas Back Again," travelers may accidentally stumble upon the town of Evergreen and be swept up in a holiday romance for the first time after the death of a spouse, but the handsome widow will fall head-over-heels with zero signs of residual trauma or lingering grief. ALL GOOD! Their children are very eager to find a new mom and drink hot chocolate while having a very extended conversation about the next intergenerational Christmas community dance.

There is something so compelling about these tidy storylines. Predictable. Trustworthy. ....And, frankly, an escape for many of us living with crippling pain, grappling with our estranged families, and reckoning with lives that haven't turned out like we thought they would.

As much as I love the Christmas Nostalgia Machine (AND I DO!), we don't usually get a lot of permission to say the following undeniable truth: the fragility of the people we love makes Christmas layered with a lot of different feelings.

Love. Nostalgia. Grief. Worry. Joy. Exhaustion. Loneliness. Want of more cookie-making (or eating).

Especially for those in caring professions or serving as caregivers.

Right now is still an exhausting time to be a nurse or doctor, work in a hospital, serve as a teacher, social worker, or pastor, or take care of the people we love. The need is simply too great. And the cost of caring is sometimes too much to bear.

We live in webs of love and obligation and pain and joy. So as we are scribbling out the last Christmas cards and trying to figure out who gets the Christmas cake (UGH! WHY IS IT SO GROSS AND MADE ANNUALLY!), let's send a little goodness and light to the people who are carrying love on their backs.

Will you pray this prayer with me?

God of compassion and love,

we offer you all our suffering and pain. Give us strength to bear our weakness, healing even when there is no cure, peace in the midst of turmoil, and love to fill the spaces in our lives.

#### Amen.

—from Service of Prayer for Healing, The Iona Abbey Worship Book

## REFLECT

What words or actions feel like love to you today?

# **BONUS ACTIVITY**

SOMETIMES
SUNSHINE CAN
BE DELIVERED

Think of five people that you know who are in a caring profession or serve as a caregiver.

Offer them acknowledgement and gratitude today.

- 1. Write them a note of thanks and send it through the mail. Perhaps include the prayer from above.
- 2. Send them a gift card for take out or groceries or coffee.
- 3. Drop off treats or a care package at their doorstep.

Let's remind these beautiful people again, that their love and sacrifice has not gone unnoticed this Christmas.

# EVERYDAY HOLINESS

#### READ

# **FPHFSIANS 4:6**

What if your everyday world was a little bit holy? Let me give you an example.

Every year, I give a lecture in my American Christianity class that includes a little story about Jean Brébeuf.

He was born in France in the late 1500s, and he entered the Society of Jesus, which is a priestly order known for being unbelievably careful students of the people that they are going to evangelize. I always like to read my students the diary entries from these Jesuits and their great practical tips like "if you start canoeing, people will expect you to keep canoeing." Or, "if someone offers you something to eat, eat all you can without complaint." I mean, those are just great life lessons all around.:)

As a young priest, he was sent to the Great Lakes area to work among the Huron people. He learned their language. He actually ended up writing a dictionary so that later linguists will know a lot about this incredible tribe. But my favorite part is this:

He wrote songs about when Jesus was born, Christmas songs about what it would be like if Jesus was born as a little Huron baby. They are songs we still sing in Canada today. And my favorite is the "Huron Carol."

It has all of these lovely details, like instead of shepherds, it is the wandering hunters who heard the angels—sent by The Great Spirit to sing over the baby king wrapped in a robe of rabbit skin. And instead of Three Wise Men, there are traveling Elders who kneel before him bringing their gifts—not gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but fur, beaver pelt, and sunflower oil from the tall waving flowers that Brébeuf must have seen nearby.

There's actually a really adorable version that my mom taught us which begins, "'Twas in the moon of winter-time when all the birds had fled, that mighty Gitchi Manitou sent angel choirs instead..." that I was always pretty good at.

For Brébeuf, Jesus didn't have swaddling clothes, he's in a little papoose, a baby in one of those little leather backpacks that Indigenous moms would wrap their babies in.

Brébeuf looked around and wondered, what if everything that is holy isn't somewhere else?

Within a lodge of broken bark The tender Babe was found,
A ragged robe of rabbit skin Enwrapp'd His beauty round;
But as the hunter braves drew nigh,
The angel song rang loud and high...
"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born, In excelsis gloria."

—The Huron Carol

What if it's right here? What if these are things that God would use if God showed up and needed a blanket?

I hear a lot from people who need to invent their own ways of being holy in difficult moments, and I just want to say, YES. What an excellent idea. Even when it's messy. Perhaps even in those bad manners you detect at the grocery store, you see a bad day instead of a bad attitude. Secretly hesitating that one little step to let them get ahead of you in line, the irritating become a little bit holy. There's rest in that. There's something else to pay attention to.

When you slow down, you can sip the beauty in the everyday.

And notice that light that shines through your baby's fingertips. Or to delight in the sneakiness of the pink of dawn that catches hold in patches of sky you thought the sun couldn't reach. To know, when you pick up that shell, you really do hear the ocean. In the color and texture of ordinary

vegetables, and the magic in kitchens everywhere when heat and oil and spices collide. And what if it's actually true most of the time, that less can be more. Or that faster is not better.

Sometimes people worry that they are being irreverent. That things that are divine and beautiful shouldn't be everyday things. But I think that this is exactly how we know that our biographies are special. It's all in the details.

So this week, if you need a minute to feel God interrupting your life, don't worry too much about making it sacred. Maybe you just need a hot minute in the car in the Target parking lot to remember that the very stuff of your life is holy.

# REFLECT

Describe a time you experienced the divine in an everyday moment lately.

# A CONSPIRACY OF LOVE

READ

MATTHEW 6:3-4

Many years ago, my mom finally had the conversation she dreaded.

My sister marched up to her and demanded to know, "Mom, is Santa Claus real?" Her curiosity didn't end there. She needed to know about the bite in Santa's cookie. The reindeer teeth marks on the carrot. The footprints left in the snow. She paused and said with eyes bright with wonder, "You mean...the whole world is in on this?"

Santa is a figure of great controversy, but think about it. In our world, most shiny things are. After all, Jesus came and they tried to put that light out too. Though Santa is associated mostly with Christmas Eve, his origins hearken back to a real gift-bringer whose feast day is celebrated on December 6th. He is Saint Nicholas of Myra. Though Nicholas is viewed by many in the 21st century as just a quaint figure of legend, he was once seen as, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, the most powerful of all saints. His reach is such that he is the patron saint of Aberdonians, apothecaries, Austrians, bakers, barrel-makers, boatmen, Belgians, boot-blacks, brewers, brides,

butchers, button-makers, captives, chandlers, children, coopers, dock workers, Dutchmen, druggists, firemen, fishermen, florists, folk falsely-accused, Greeks, grooms, haberdashers, judges, Liverpudlians, longshoremen, merchants, murderers, newlyweds, notaries, old maids, orphans, parish clerks, paupers, pawnbrokers, perfumers, pharmacists, pilgrims, pirates, poets, rag pickers, Russians, sailors, sealers, shipwrights, Sicilians, spice dealers, thieves, travellers, and weavers. Hundreds of churches are named after him all across Europe, even as far as Greenland where the first cathedral erected by the Viking settlers was dedicated to him. Now that would be a great Roadside America stop— the world's largest replica of the Greenland Viking Saint Nicholas church with real ice and snow!

Nicholas's story is big enough that he would easily have become a modern-day celebrity. Born in the eastern Roman Empire in what is now Turkey, in the late 200s, Nicholas was imprisoned in the last wave of anti-Christian persecution under the emperor Diocletian. After his release following

the accession of Constantine, he became bishop of Myra (a town now known as Demre). He is said to have attended the important Council of Nicaea in 325 where he gained a reputation for feistiness by smacking the heretic Arius. Yet this irrepressible Nicholas came to represent the power of love and secret acts of generosity that we rediscover each year at Christmas.

An enormous body of legends has grown up around his generosity and miracles. The two most lasting stories of Nicholas both concern children. The saint, having heard that a poor man's daughters might have to become prostitutes, secretly provided three bags of gold to provide each one with a dowry and find a husband. In another tale, Nicholas visited an inn where the evil innkeeper had murdered three students and pickled them in brine. Nicholas detected the crime and raised the boys to life again; for this and similar miracles, he becomes the patron saint of students and children.

By 1100, Saint Nicholas is firmly associated with the Christmas season. His feast day became linked to the custom of the Boy Bishop who rules certain churches—right up until the December 28, Feast of the Holy Innocents. This is quite a long period of reversal of power, another symbol of the social inversion that Jesus came to bring. Children had been so long been considered dispensable, the custom of giving gifts to children on St. Nicholas's day was yet another reminder that Christ came to the weak and vulnerable, and this practice soon spread across Europe.

By the sixteenth century, German children hung out their stockings for him to drop presents in just as he had dropped bags of gold to the poor man's daughters. At the same time in England, children were told that he came in through the window.

Interestingly, the sixteenth century that saw the Protestant Reformation made war on the cult of saints, and this resulted in Saint Nicholas being replaced as Gift-Bringer, first by the Christ Child and then by secularized figures resembling a darker shadow of Saint Nicholas, such as Pelznickel, Belsnickel, or Knecht Ruprecht. The gift-giving time was also moved from December 6 to December 25 or New Year's Day. Among Protestant countries, only the Netherlands maintained its devotion to Saint Nicholas, known there as Sinterklaas.

It is this figure of Sinterklaas that inspired early 19th century Americans in New York City to develop a new Gift-Bringer, Santa Claus. And it is Santa Claus who is exported back to Europe to provide the model for Gift-Bringers such as Father Christmas, the Weihnachtsmann, and Père Noël. Today, Saint Nicholas, clad as a Catholic bishop complete with crozier and mitre, and companions such as Zwarte Piet still bring gifts on the eve of December 6 to children in the Netherlands and other areas of Europe. In fact, his popularity has renewed because he stands for old national customs in the face of an Americanization of the European Christmas.

But in whatever form, Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus still comes, and the conspiracy of love continues. Parents all over the world still sneak in the dark to fill stockings to delight their children, and I just have to wonder....is the good Saint Nicholas of Myra looking on, and does he smile to see the legacy continue? A story of the unquenchable joy and mysterious power that is at the heart of selfless love.

# REFLECT

What is your favorite memory of Christmas as a child? What made it so wonder-filled?

# THE SEASON OF GIVING

READ

ACTS 20:35

During Advent, our busyness or obligations or stress might make it difficult to find opportunities for generosity and real social connection. Yet, we still long for touchstones that can anchor us in our traditions of giving and receiving. Maybe it's time to let history expand our awareness, and show us some traditions we could adapt to make this season a little brighter, a little sillier perhaps, just for fun.

Ever since the Middle Ages, people have used the Christmas season to go door-to-door soliciting charity in return for a song or good wishes for the coming year. Be like the goofballs in Alsace who in 1462, dressed up as the Magi on the eve of Epiphany and visited neighbors, just because. Or the lads in 16th century Yorkshire who used to go "Christmas ceshing"—knocking on the doors of strangers and shouting "Wish you a Merry Christmas, mistress and master." Random visits such as these happened all around the world, where at Christmas it was expected that people owed each other extra hospitality and maybe free drinks, in exchange for a blessing. In those

cases where a gift was not forthcoming, curses were often uttered. (Whoa there, I think treatshaming is a bridge too far.)

In central and eastern Europe, the Star Boys still parade, though now the money collected is often directed toward the developing world. In the Austrian village of Oberndorf where "Silent Night" was first written, boatmen who were unable to work during the winter months used to go about at Christmas soliciting donations to see them through until spring. The custom died for a time when modern social welfare attitudes were adopted by the government but it was revived in the 20th century in a different form. Now groups of men walk around with their lanterns, bells, and a Christmas crib atop a pole collecting money for charity. Even though the true begging visit has declined, Christmas is still the season for encouraging charity as shown by the example of the Salvation Army with its street-corner kettles.

History has plenty of examples where Christmas has awakened in people a renewed desire for

# **BONUS ACTIVITY**

# EXTRAORDINARY EMPATHY

conviviality and increased generosity. More new and creative ways have appeared that blur or shake up our normal boundaries of social exchange, such as the phenomenon of random acts of kindness, or pay it forward.

What adaptations might you come up with, to spark fun, make someone's day, and test out the maxim that it is more blessed to give than to receive?

# REFLECT

Who said that a life of faith always has to be a somber affair, expressed in a minor key? Consider the lillies, yes, but what about the blobfish? The California leaf-nosed bat? Even the most cursory glance at nature's silliest creatures will tell you that God invented fun. What's the most lighthearted fun you've ever had at Christmas?

Would you give an organ to a total stranger? How about run into a burning building to save someone you don't even know? If you saw someone on the side of the road and they looked like they really needed help, would you stop? Some people go to incredible lengths to help strangers. That isn't just empathy, that is extraordinary altruism. So what makes a person risk one's own wellbeing for someone else? I spoke with researcher Abigail Marsh about the use of fear, what it really means to be brave, and how we can all learn to better belong to one another.

Listen to my conversation with Abigail on "Extraordinary Empathy" at KateBowler.com/
podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

What's the most extraordinary example of extraordinary altruism you've ever experienced?

# A CRY AND A CALL

# READ

ISAIAH 40:9

What do we say when we express wonder beyond words, when we look intently? When we address someone or something that fills us with love and joy in its presence, and intense longing in its absence?

It is more of an exclamation than a word. We say O!

O is the smallest word in English, yet it is packed with meaning. It yearns toward what it longs for, like a flower turning its face to the sun. This smallest of words, O, perfectly expresses both the cry and the call of Advent in its very essence. It is the rapturous lament that expresses both longing and joy in perhaps the most beloved of all Advent hymns:

O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

In this hymn, O! is both exclamation and invocation. It cries out to God who is unknowable, yet loved and understood mysteriously through the poetic symbolism in each verse.

Each verse of this hymn is based on one of the medieval O Antiphons, written in the 8th century to be sung each evening in the week leading up to Christmas. An Antiphon in worship is a short phrase sung before a psalm or anthem. The O Antiphons draw upon the rich imagery of the Hebrew scriptures that proclaim Christ as Messiah as the fulfillment of all hope, and are sung in worship just before the Song of Mary when she poured out her joy that God would fulfill His promises to her. (Luke 1:46-56)

Each of the antiphons addresses Christ, opens to our hearts to his majesty, and expresses a human longing or need expressed as worship. For example, the first one is O Wisdom:

"O Wisdom, which came from the mouth of the Most High, and reaches from one end to another, mightly and sweetly ordering all things: Come, and teach us the way of prudence."

And here they all are, in their glory! O Wisdom (O Sapientia), O Lord (O Adonai), O Root of Jesse (O Radix), O Key of David (O Clavis), O King of Nations (O Rex Gentium), and finally, O come, Emmanuel, whose meaning is: God with us.

O is the powerful word that links them all. It could cross the barrier from Latin into English because it is perfect for expressing urgency. It leans with anticipation into what follows next—to the person addressed. Each verse of the hymn cries out for Jesus to come, and expresses the hope that is fixed on the fulfillment of Advent longing, for love, joy, and peace.

The word O invites us to look. And look long. Toward the Beloved, toward the source of all love. And feel our longing for the One to come. Our hopes fulfilled.

At Advent, our expectant hope is Mary's also, for nestled in her womb is the source of all life, the Son of God who will give himself for the salvation of the world. As an Advent worship experiment, I invite you to find online all seven verses of the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" for they are based on the ancient Antiphons, and sing each one quietly, or just inwardly. Imagine as you sing, the coming of hope as the humble thing it truly is, a young heavily pregnant Jewish girl slowly making her way to Bethlehem, the City of David where she and Joseph must travel to be registered. There in cave or stable, she will give birth. "He will silence the uproar of the nations. The kings of the nations shall bow down. Come quickly and deliver us" (paraphrase of the 19th century translation of the Radix Antiphon by Abbot Guéranger).

And the kings of the nations do bow down. Before the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

# REFLECT

The word 'behold!'
is a curious one. It
means Look! There is
something astonishing
here. When was the
last time you saw
something that made
you stop in your
tracks?

# PROGRESSIVE NATIVITIES

# READ

ISAIAH 40:3-5

If, in December, you were to drop into the home of my mom and dad, Gerry and Karen Bowler, on the wind-swept plains of Manitoba, you would be greeted by a house in the full throes of Christmas. If you are lucky you will have arrived on an aromatic day when the oven was full of gingerbread men or Scottish shortbread or Bavarian stollen. An Advent calendar hangs on the door. There are Advent candles and a pewter Advent wreath on the table. Figures of the world's Gift-Bringers are on every flat space: Santa Claus, Father Christmas, the Yule Lads of Iceland, a German Belsnickel. (You might wonder why my childhood home is this into Christmas, as if it's a passion or something. But then you would be less shocked when I tell you that it is because my dad is an expert on Christmas. No really. He wrote Santa's biography.)

And everywhere there are nativity scenes, also known around the world as crèches, presepios, portals, beléns, nacimientos, Weihnachtskrippen, or pesebres. For over a thousand years, churches, town squares, palaces, and homes have been adorned at Christmas with replicas of the stable scene in Bethlehem where the Baby Jesus was born. You might have one too.

Tradition says that only at midnight on Christmas Eve will the infant Christ be placed in the manger. Then, only on January 6, Epiphany, the Wise Men reach their goal and adore the Christ Child. (The well-equipped nativity scene organizer will have two sets of Magi: one traveling, and one worshiping.)

My parents' collection includes some real showstoppers, but my favorites are the ones that put the nativity scene in modern or cultural contexts. Like the one from Colombia where a colorful jeep holds the migrating Holy Family, with all their possessions including a television piled on top. From Peru, there is a folk art retablo, a painted case that opens to reveal Mary and Joseph and peasants in traditional Andean costumes with the usual ox and ass in the stable replaced by llamas. There is a large Salvadorian crib with a baby and parents looking as if they had been made by Picasso in his Cubist phase and a tiny Guatemalan nativity scene in an egg. When I visited Portugal this spring, I brought him home a nativity scene in a sardine can.

Pride of place in their living room is given to the traditional miniature barnyard scene, featuring Mary and Joseph hovering over a crib, surrounded by animals, townspeople of various occupations, Roman soldiers, and the odd angel with the Magi off in the distance but getting closer every day. Most of the figures are about 3" tall but there is no uniformity of culture or period. There is a Franciscan friar rubbing shoulders with a shepherd whose cloak blows in the mistral wind of southern France. There are fishermen, housewives, merchants, a carved wooden warthog from South Africa and, hiding discreetly in the back, a caganer figure from Catalonia performing a rude act of nature. When Zach first saw this, he knew it was pretty edgy, and wanted to take it out of the manger and "frow it far away." Many of these figures have been found on the Via San Gregorio Armeno in Naples, a street filled with shops selling only nativity scenes.

My Dad covets a recent ironic version entitled "The Hipster Nativity" where the Wise Men arrive bearing Amazon boxes on Segways, Mary and Joseph are taking a selfie, the stable is solar powered, a shepherd is posting the scene to Instagram and the sheep are given gluten-free feed, but so far my mom and good taste have stood in the way.

# REFLECT

How do you normally prepare your heart and home for Christmas, and how are the two connected?

## **BONUS ACTIVITY**

# PROGRESSIVE NATIVITY

Maybe you would like to practice what is called The Progressive Crèche in your household this year. This nativity scene builds each day we get closer to Christmas Eve. If you don't have a crèche already, get creative. Make the figures out of paper or tree trimmings instead.

Here are the rules for a Progressive Crèche:

- Add villagers and animals gradually
- Kids can add straw for every good deed done in Advent
- Holy Family and Magi should slowly approach
- No Baby Jesus until Christmas midnight
- No Magi near cradle until January 6

Re-read Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2. Notice how this practice invites you into the intentionality behind the Christmas scene.



# DAY 14

We are waiting, longing for you,
God whose name is Love.
You call us to love others,
but love us first.
So beautifully, so resoundingly,
without reciprocation or judgment
in your words and deeds,
your subversive acts that raised up the lowly.
In your birth and death and resurrection.

Jesus, you showed us that you are the real thing, the Love that doesn't fake it, make money on it, and then crap out on the desperate and lonely just when they need love the most.

Jesus, that's us, this Advent.

Blessed are we who admit it.

We are waiting and longing and calling to you with joy on tiptoes, for Love to be born again.

Amen.

# REFLECT

Each child received so openly and unconditionally by Jesus was given a blessing. Imagine yourself there as one of these little ones. What might your blessing be?