

#### HELLO MY DEAR,

Are you ready for Christmas? Oh how I used to hate that question. It would usually come when I was already overwhelmed. Gifts? Decorated cookies? What are those? And what about the deeper things, like how is your heart doing in the midst of it all, and what about your flagging spirit? And are the kids alright? Is your friend still struggling with what's-his-face?

The thought of Christmas, whenever it comes, is the ultimate challenge to the human spirit. It represents longing and desire at every level. It is the symbol of plenty, of fulfillment, of more-than-enough-ness, and of the expectation that perhaps now we can be just a little more loving, more forgiving.

Maybe this Christmas the world can suck just a little less. (I can't believe I put these words in the same sentence.) But come on. Isn't this what we all want for Christmas this year? For reality to be a little less terrible? So what do we do? Depends on the day, right? We have glimpses of light that seem God-given. And then some days are so dark we can only feel our way along.

But here, in this community we have the great privilege of gathering and saying to one another, REMEMBER. There's more than meets the eye. Remember: You are worth more than this. Remember in your darker moments what you knew before—so exquisitely, so intimately—that there is more love somewhere, and it's for you and for everyone, and it shines from the heart of God. From the light of the manger.

Through this Advent devotional, we hold in remembrance the holy

truth that God came to put things right. The ruler of the cosmos

came to us, trapped in a squalling package of that most helpless

human form—a newborn baby boy. He was born to save us—and he

will—but first he must melt our hearts, appearing not as a sage or a

philosopher or an emperor but as a shivering little child with no

home. A refugee. He disarms us with his tender vulnerability and

summons us to enter his world as little children, too.

Now that another year has upended life-as-usual all over again,

our inner desires and deepest needs are revealed. We see the

world as it has always been. And we are here, waiting, longing, for

the kingdom of God to break in.

My hope and prayer is that this Advent Devotional will be a

way for you to make the very act of waiting, holy. And as we

anticipate Christ's birth together, may we experience the

stubborn hope of Christmas, joy in the midst of sorrow, a love that

knows no bounds, and a transcendent peace amid a world on fire.

Jesus can't be born soon enough.

Onward together,

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## HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL GUIDE:

Depending on the year, Advent lasts somewhere between 22 to 28 days. It begins with the Sunday nearest to St. Andrew's Feast Day (in 2022, Advent began on Sunday, November 27) and ends on Christmas Eve. But that is when the fun begins. December 25 ushers in the season of Christmastide—because Christmas is more than a single day; it is twelve days (I apologize in advance for getting that song stuck in your head).

Throughout the devotional that follows, we will ground ourselves in practices that make the very act of waiting holy. Each day, you will find a scripture to study, a short devotional to read, and a question to reflect on. You are invited to do this solo (God knows we could all use a little time to ourselves during the busyness of the season), or grab

a friend or neighbor or small group and practice the act of holy expectation together. You can print this out, get it bound at a local printer, or return to it online every day (just be sure to bookmark the URL or save it as a PDF on your computer).

The team here at the Everything Happens Project has said a prayer for you—may the God of hope and promise and goodness meet you on these pages. May this be a season marked by love and peace and joy "though you have considered all the facts." (Wendell Berry) May you find yourself surprised and delighted by a God who would come in such fragile form, and may the kingdom of God break into your home, under your tree, around your table, and in your heart. Bless you, dear one. And Merry Christmas.

#### Acknowledgements:

A huge thank you to my team at the Everything Happens Project for putting together another wonderful devotional. And to our financial supporters who make it possible to create free resources like this—The Duke Endowment, Lilly Endowment, and Duke Divinity School. This is my favorite kind of group project. Thank you.

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# CHRISTMAS ISN'T JUST A DAY. IT'S A FRAM

—Kris Kringle
in Miracle on 34th Street

OF MIND."

#### WAITING IS OUR TRUE STATE

#### READ

2 PETER 3:13

We are waiting for a world where righteousness is at home. And it isn't. Not even close. Righteousness—not a checklist, but a faith that trusts in the newness that God is bringing to completion. Yet we know that here and now, things are not the way they are supposed to be.

And in the midst of this uncertainty, we trudge into the season of Advent. Twentieth century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) wrote, "Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth." He penned these words in a letter to his parents, while he sat in prison, jailed for his resistance efforts against Hitler's regime.

After receiving his doctorate in Berlin, Bonhoeffer attended African American churches in the United States where he began to consider the proper Christian response to injustice—a curiosity that came to bear when confronted with the new Nazi regime in his home country of Germany. He was a brave and open opponent of Hitler's plans for racial persecution and euthanasia of the helpless. When the Nazis took over the German Protestant churches, Bonhoeffer and others formed the

underground Confessing Church to train pastors and conduct services free from fascist ideology. In the midst of this turmoil he wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, where he contrasts "cheap grace"—grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate—with a costly grace that requires contrition and submission to Jesus.

Bonhoeffer was in the United States when the Second World War broke out in 1939. His friends urged him to stay in safety but he said:

"I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

Back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was recruited by the Abwehr, the military intelligence bureau, which contained cells of anti-Nazis. There, he helped in the escape of Jews and served as a contact between the German resistance movement and the Western Allies. In 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned, first in a military prison, then a Gestapo cell, and then in Flossenbürg concentration camp. While waiting for his trial

## "GOD IS IN THE MANGER, WEALTH IN POVERTY, LIGHT IN DARKNESS, SUCCOR IN ABANDONMENT."

— DIFTRICH BONHOFFFR

and execution, Bonhoeffer wrote widely. These letters and papers were smuggled out of prison, and from them comes these reflections on the meaning of Advent:

"Celebrating Advent means being able to wait. Waiting is an art that our impatient age has forgotten. It wants to break open the ripe fruit when it has hardly finished planting the shoot.... For the greatest, most profound, tenderest things in the world, we must wait. It happens not here in a storm but according to the divine laws of sprouting, growing, and becoming.

Just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. **God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment.** No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."

His letter to his parents continues:

"We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us.... I think of you as you

now sit together with the children and with all the Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have."

Bonhoeffer and fellow resisters were executed in April 1945, just weeks before the end of the war.

Advent isn't just a season in the Christian calendar. Advent is a state of being. So over the next four weeks, we are going to explore what it means to live in hopeful anticipation during a season of suffering and fear and uncertainty. When we just don't quite know when it's going to be okay, Advent reminds us of the discipline of hope.

#### REFLECT

As we wait and look long for the promises of God to come, where do you notice the "most profound, tenderest things in the world" (Bonhoeffer) secretly sprouting, growing, and becoming?

## HOPE WHEN IT'S BLEAK

#### READ

HEBREWS 11:1

Some memories are worth holding as something you can taste, and you'll soon see why.

A couple of years ago, at the first sight of snow, my then six-year-old son Zach ran outside screaming. I mean, screaming.

"Oh hello snoooow!! Welcome to my life!"

For a boy who has grown up in mild North Carolina winters, the first snowfall in Winnipeg, Manitoba, felt extra magical.

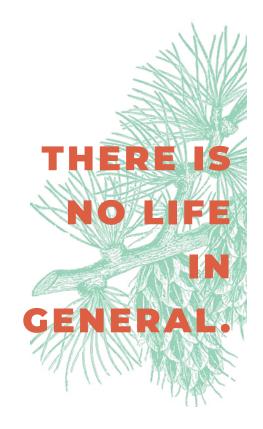
I was also aware that it was not a small miracle to be there, at my mom's house, making banana fritters with caramel drizzle, ice cream, and extra sprinkles (per Zach's request).

We have this little tradition that when the first snow sticks on the ground, we must make donuts that very night. In Canada, the snow falls and stays far beyond its welcome—oh I don't know, UNTIL JULY. So we make an effort to celebrate before we get tired of all this cold and don't feel very celebratory any longer. So every year,

we continue this little ritual, even from North Carolina, just as snow (or at least frost) comes again, and thank God, the banana fritters.

But not long ago I was mourning the life I thought would never come again... and I wrote:

There is nothing generic about a human life. When I was little, to get to my bus stop, I had to cross a field that had so much snow my parents fitted me with ski pants and knee-high thermal boots that were toasty in forty degrees below zero. I am excellent in the stern of a canoe, but I never got the hang of riding a bike with no hands. I have seen the northern lights because my parents always woke up the whole house when the night sky was painted with color. I love the smell of clover and chamomile because my sister and I used to pick both on the way home from swimming lessons. I spent weeks of my childhood riding around on my bike saving drowning worms after a heavy rain. My hair is my favorite feature even though it's too heavy for most ponytails, and I still can't parallel park. There is no life \*in general.\*



When a pandemic or disease or grieving a loss shrinks the walls of our lives, we can begin to believe that hope has been lost. That the lives we had before are over. That we may never again experience the joys and dreams and horizons we once assumed were infinite. That there is nothing left to celebrate.

Yes, things have changed. Yes, life looks different and our limitations are so much more obvious. Yes, we are lonely and sick and hungry for a taste of normalcy. But today, there is no life \*in general.\* Praise God. There are only fritters.

Speaking of, my sweet mom, Karen, gave me permission to share her recipe for Banana Fritters and Caramel Sauce, in case you want to start this tradition yourself. Or keep it up, if you already started it last year. It will be for you a tiny moment to celebrate that yes, life has changed. But no, it has not taken everything.

#### REFLECT

There is no life
\*in general.\* What
specificities make your
life, yours?

## Banana Fritters with Caramel Sauce

#### **INGREDIENTS**

#### **DIRECTIONS**

#### **Caramel Sauce**

1/3 cup butter1 cup brown sugar1/3 cup water1 tbsp. cornstarch1 and 1/2 cup heavy cream

Make ahead. It stores for a week in the fridge.

Combine all 5 ingredients in a medium saucepan. Heat and stir on medium-high for 5 to 10 minutes until boiling and thickened. Makes 1 and 1/2 cups sauce.

#### **Banana Fritter Batter**

1 cup all-purpose flour 2 tsp baking powder 1/4 tsp baking soda 1 and 1/4 cups water 2 quarts cooking oil 3 tbsp. flour 4-5 bananas

ice cream and sprinkles for serving.

Combine into a large bowl:

All-purpose flour, Baking powder, baking soda Make a well in the center.

Pour in water. Whisk until smooth.

Heat cooking oil in a pot or deep-fryer.

Add flour into a smaller bowl. Cut bananas in

3-4 inch chunks. Coat them in the flour, and then dip each piece in your batter.

Deep-fry, in 2 to 3 batches, in hot (350°F) cooking oil for 3 to 5 minutes until golden brown. Remove and place on paper towels to drain.

Serve with caramel sauce, ice cream, and extra sprinkles.

#### HIDDEN LIVES OF HOPE

#### READ

JOHN 12:20-22

In the Church Calendar, certain days are set aside for honoring Saints and celebrating their lives, and in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions these are Feast Days. That's because we want to celebrate them. Not because they are superhuman, but because they are just ordinary people with extraordinary faith. The first of our Advent saints is Saint Andrew, which is appropriate because he was the first person to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:18-20) and the first to bring others to him (John 1:40-42). For this reason the Church has placed his day at the beginning of the Christian calendar — Advent Sunday is the Sunday nearest to Saint Andrew's Day. I am all in favor of a feast day in the middle of Advent, a party in the middle of our longing and our not enough. And as a historian, I look to the lives of Saints not just like figures in a stained-glass window, but as people whose lives still speak.

So what does Saint Andrew's life say to us?

He is a strange one. He's like the friend in high school you vaguely remember, but only as that guy that the teacher always called by his brother's name. He would have been George, "the quiet Beatle." Andrew is only mentioned 12 times in the Bible, and was often referred to as

Simon Peter's brother. And because there is so little known about him, there is a lot of legend.

It is said that Andrew preached the Christian message widely after the Resurrection. He is said to have visited what is now Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and Greece where he was martyred in 60 C.E. during the reign of Emperor Nero. Tradition says that Andrew did not deem himself worthy to die in the same way as Christ, so he was crucified on an X-shaped cross instead, a symbol seen on the flag of Scotland, of which Andrew is the patron saint.

What we do know for certain is that Andrew was one of the original apostles. In fact, he was the first to be called. Andrew was a young fisherman from the village of Bethsaida whom Jesus called from his boat and net to become a "fisher of men." The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon Peter and tell him, "'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus" (John 1:41). Andrew is the friend, the brother, who drags others to Jesus. And, as you may know, his brother Peter became the rock on which Christ's church is built (Mathew 16:18). Andrew is the disciple who drew the attention of Jesus to the boy with the basket

of loaves and fishes (John 6:8–9), which provided the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. He is the one who points to things needing attention. He was present with Christ at the Last Supper and the Mount of Olives. Andrew had a front row seat for the life of Christ.

Are you feeling it? The way that Andrew stayed in the background, but was in the foreground of what was important? He was the link between Jesus and the suffering that could be alleviated. The hungry that could be fed. The lost that could be found. Andrew the Obscure was the first to be called, but made himself the last to be noticed.

Are you living a hidden life? There's a good chance you could be one of those on the inside track, doing work that is so precious to God that it is never subjected to the garish light of public view. If you're an Andrew, you are living out of the deep center of the plan to make all things new.

#### REFLECT

If someone told you Jesus was near, and brought you to meet him, what would you ask?

#### **BONUS ACTIVITY**

### YOUR WORK IS YOUR CALLING

What does it mean to be called to something? What if that job wears you thin? What if you think you've aged out of your vocation? I spoke with the Reverend Dr. Will Willimon about what to do when the roles we play cost us more than we're willing to pay and how aging invites us to take a new look at our purpose.

Listen to my conversation with Will on "Your Work Is Your Calling" at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

"I think one of the challenges of the Christian life is to realize that the life we're living is not our own," says pastor and professor Will Willimon. Is this one of the challenges of your life? If so, how are you experiencing that challenge?

## LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

#### READ

1 JOHN 2:8-10

Zach helps me light the candles on the Advent wreath each Sunday. It's a tradition, created by a German pastor in the 19th century as a way to teach kids about the coming of Christ. We flick off the fluorescent lamp in our living room and let the darkness sink in.

The tradition traces back to 1833 in Hamburg, Germany. Johann Hinrich Wichern opened the "Rauhe Haus," the Rough House, which sheltered orphaned or neglected children. Every night of Advent, he told them stories, prayed, and lit a candle. To accommodate the candles a wheel-shaped chandelier was built, around which evergreens were twined. Visitors and supporters were impressed by this display and the custom spread, but those who imitated it reduced it in size to four candles, one for each week of Advent.

Many churches and homes mark the progress of Advent by lighting one candle a week until on the final Sunday when all four are alight. Three of these candles are purple or violet (penitential colors) while the one lit on the third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday) is the pink of rejoicing. After Christmas, these candles are often replaced with white ones.

The candles represent the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, and it was once customary for someone named John or Joan to be first to light them because John the Baptist at the River Jordan was the first to see the fire of divinity in Jesus (John 1:29–34), and John the Evangelist began his Gospel by referring to Jesus as the Light (John 1:1–5). The wreath is an ancient symbol of victory, while the greenery represents the everlasting life.

As I explained the practice all over again to my still very wiggly nine-year-old, I am struck by the contrast of light and dark during the Advent season in particular.

In our era of artificial street lamps, incandescent light available at the click of a switch, and glowing blue and red dots blinking from every appliance, we forget just how dark winter is, when the sun seems so pale and far away and the nights are long.

Our ancestors knew this kind of darkness intimately. In December after sunset, they locked the doors, shuttered the windows, and tucked in early. Their folktales warned them that as Christmas drew near the spirits of darkness began to range more actively, furious at the approach of

the Christ Child. Witches, werewolves, and evil forces are abroad in the night seeking to harm humans, steal children, and destroy their livestock. Ritual steps were taken to keep witches from coming down the chimney or to keep monsters out of the home. In Scandinavia, families often slept together for protection on Christmas Eve, the peak of evil's power.

Darkness seems to always carry a bad reputation. Whether literally or metaphorically, it represents the unknown. The scary. The avoidat–all-costs. But perhaps there are things we can't learn under blazing artificial light that we can only learn in the dark. It takes being outside at night to squint for the stars. Or flipping off the light so Zach can watch candlelight dance. (He did seem terrifyingly enamored by the flame.)

But this lack of light will never take us by surprise. We know that we are born into a broken world, that violence and sin are daily constants in life on planet Earth, and that it took a hideous death of an innocent man to free us. We also know that there is an inexhaustible source of brightness and warmth in the person of Jesus who first appeared to us as a baby in a manger some two thousand years ago.

The arrival of Jesus was preceded by a light in the heavens that guided the Magi, and was hailed by an old wise man in the Temple as the appearance of "a light unto the Gentiles." (Isaiah 49:6)

Christ became our light in the darkness of this world. **Thanks be to God.** 

#### REFLECT

"New life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

—Barbara Brown
Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark

What have you learned in the darkness that you could not have learned in the light?

#### LONG EXPECTATIONS

READ

**ISAIAH 45:8** 

Longing is the experience of feeling the lack, the recognition, that things are not as they should be. This is the feeling of Advent. During Advent, Christians prepare for the great celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. And they do it through the practice of waiting, the practice of extended hope.

Come, thou long expected Jesus

Born to set thy people free

From our fears and sins release us

Let us find our rest in thee Israel's strength and consolation

Hope of all the earth thou art

Dear desire of every nation Joy of every longing heart.

— Charles Wesley, 1745

This longing is not like the inimitable *saudade* of Portuguese and Brazilian culture, a word that is difficult to translate but represents a kind of deep pining for something that may never be, and perhaps never was. The longing of Advent is for the Messiah that has come and will come again.

In Advent, we are surrounded by the awareness that this posture of waiting—of longing—is our ever-present reality. Waiting and longing for hope, love, joy, and peace. For all those beautiful and elusive things that we can sometimes taste—reminding us that God is good—but that have not come to completion.

Ancient Franciscan monks expressed this longing in a wondrously tender chant based on Isaiah 45:8 that in Latin is called *Rorate Caeli Desuper*: "Drop down dew, ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain down the Just One."

In the Messiah, justice and mercy are distilled together, and speak peace that falls like the refreshment of long-awaited rain.

The promise of the coming and longing we feel is sung in Advent carols and hymns, because sometimes song is the best way to express it. We anticipate with joy the release that is coming for all people, and for the utter redemption of the whole earth. We see it enacted every year as winter releases its hold and spring enacts the annual transformation, the bursting forth of tender green leaves spring forth from dry branches, the bees that search out the honeyed lips of blossoms that fill the world with color.

#### **ADVENT RECOGNIZES THE**

#### ABSENCE OF PEACE,

## YET THE EXQUISITE CERTAINTY OF ITS COMING.

Christina Rosetti's poem and Gustave Holst's beautiful tune gives this feeling such tender voice. It is a poem that is perfect for Advent, because it slides together the two realities we experience—the perfection that comes down to us as a baby in the bleak mid-winter of our souls. The absence of peace, yet the exquisite certainty of its coming.

In the bleak midwinter,

Frosty wind made moan;

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow.

In the bleak mid-winter long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,

Nor earth sustain, Heaven and

earth shall flee away

When he comes to reign:

In the bleak midwinter

A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty — Jesus Christ.

So, my dears, this Advent season, may we learn to wait in hope, trusting that the God who was born two thousand years ago will come again.

#### REFLECT

What beauty, goodness, or joy do you long for today?

## PRACTICING HOPE

READ

LUKE 1:78-79

When the early church chose December 25 as the date to celebrate the Nativity, they must have been aware of the powerful symbolism of midwinter, when the seasons turn, when darkness, at long last, begins to diminish.

In one of the early medieval antiphons sung on the seven evenings before Christmas Eve, Jesus is hailed as "O, dawn of the east, splendor of light eternal, sun of justice." We still sing in our carol O Come, O Come, Emmanuel:

O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer Our spirits by thine Advent here, And drive away the shades of night and pierce the clouds and bring us light.

That is why light is so much a part of the Advent season.

Today, let's practice hope by lighting a candle together. It can be part of your own Advent wreath, but any candle will do. As the days grow darker and nights grow longer, we need to practice the act of hope, of lighting candles in the darkness, of anchoring ourselves to the tiny flicker of light that promises God's enduring presence.

"Out of the silence, Music.

Out of the darkness, Light.

Out of uncertainty, Promise.

Hope was born that night."

— UNKNOWN

#### REFLECT

How is wishing different from expectant hope?

Pray this prayer as you light your candle:

God of all hope,

You break into our world as an infant wrapped in cloth, lying in a feeding trough (Luke 2:7).

A birth that sends a blaze of glory lighting up the fields (Luke 2:9) and filling the night sky (Matthew 2:9).

You are the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:5).

When things feel bleak, when hope feels lost,

may we remember this:

During the longest of days and darkest of nights, your never ending light shines still.

The dark is not dark to you.

You are hope. You are light. And we are not alone. All hope is not lost.

May this small flicker remind me of your unending presence, warming my heart and lighting my way.

Amen.

So Happy Advent, my dears. May we all experience a little courage in the dark, short days of winter—knowing that this is the season when the brightest light of all breaks forth.

And may this season also prepare us for the coming of Jesus in his glory, a second appearance of blazing light that will take us all home, where our tears will all be wiped away, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.

Goodbye darkness.

Hello light.



READ

JOHN 14:1

Sometimes in the darkness, we dare not hope because it feels too expensive. There is no energy available for that, humanly speaking. But hope isn't wishful thinking. It's an anchor into the future. Because of this, we can bless even our darkening days, knowing that the earth will once again tilt toward the light. And it will be a glory

that blazes everywhere, though now we catch only glimpses.

In the meantime, and that's what we have—the meantime—let's come into the light and bless the waiting, because it will not be in vain:

Oh God, as if it couldn't be possible, these are still darkening days. for our struggling earth, for our countries and their leaders, our friends and families, and for ourselves.

Blessed are we with eyes open to see the world as it really is, who say: Where are you God? and where are your people?

the smart and sensible ones who fight for good and have the power to make it stick?

Oh God, help us in our fear and confusion, amid so much uncertainty. Shine your light upon us.

God have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Spirit have mercy.

"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." —John 1:9

Though now it is a place of hidden hope, we know that You are the anchor dropped into the future—our future.

Come, Lord Jesus.
Shine on our darkness
and show us the way.
Amen.

#### REFLECT

In your life or in the lives of those you love, where is there trouble that could use the light of blessing? Pray today's blessing over that painful area.