



THE SEASON OF WAITING

(AND WAITING... AND WAITING...)

**A 4-Week Advent
Devotional**



WEEK 03

Joy is the
Oxygen

“
**WHEN THEY
SAW THE STAR,
THEY REJOICED
WITH EXCEEDING
GREAT JOY.”**

— Matthew 2:10



METABOLIZE JOY

READ

PSALM 16:11

Breathe in. And breathe out.

You are here.

And I am here too with you somehow, in writing this.

Together, we are sounding out this strange phrase: joy is the oxygen. I first heard it when I spoke with Gary Haugen, the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, an organization working to eradicate human trafficking around the world. They do heavy work, rescuing kids from sex trafficking in developing countries.

I asked Gary what his secret was. He has been doing this hard, beautiful work for nearly thirty years. How has he not burnt out? Switched to a lighter job? He told me, “Joy is the oxygen for doing hard work.” For him, it signified a kind of alchemy where hard things become not only possible, but sustainable when he finds opportunities for joy. It is spending time with his kids or getting in a rigorous exercise. But that’s his story, not yours.

Yours is the story of the particular place you find yourself right now, at the intersection of all that has been done and all that has yet to be done. It is in this space, this moment, that I want you to light a candle.

The match strikes the wick and flame rises. The wax melts, vaporizes, and combines with oxygen in the air to sustain a steady glow. The candle diminishes, yet heat and light increase.

Perhaps your candle is pink. If it is part of an Advent wreath and this is the third Sunday, then it might be. And if so you would be joining churches all around the world in lighting what is called the joy candle. And it is not white like all the other candles on the Advent wreath. But pink. The color of blushes and of pleasure. The color of sheer delight in fulfilling the purpose for which it was made.

Here and now, at the intersection of all that has gone before, and all that is yet to come, I would like to say to you that there is something for which you were made. It is the thing that seems to make you forget yourself even as you become more and more alive in it. Something rises up in you and you get an inkling that maybe, just maybe, this is why you were born. It is the oxygen that makes it possible for you to keep going. That is joy. You are fortified by it. Because you are a being that was made to metabolize joy.

In this season of so many limitations, so much sorrow, and so much perplexity, perhaps today

the reason you were made is to make soup. Just soup, out of what's left in the fridge. And eat it in peace. Or share it with someone, or give it away.

What is the thing you will think, or speak, or make, or do, or simply be today that gives you joy? What precise part of you is more alive because of it? What can shed light and warmth in the darkness of this darkening time?

Whatever it is, it is yours. And in the doing or being there is joyful amazement where strangely, it is possible to feel more alive because there is a mystical greeting going on. It is the awareness that you are in relation to the God who made you. On purpose.

REFLECT

What is the one thing you will do today that will bring you joy?

BONUS ACTIVITY

JOY IS THE OXYGEN

Certain people decide to make other people's pain their own. Gary Haugen, founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, is one of those people. I spoke with Gary about how even in the darkest places, joy and goodness can be found.

It's hard to keep caring about someone else's pain when we aren't caring well for ourselves. Gary's remedy for compassion fatigue is joy. Do you have a regular discipline for recovering joy into your life? What's your biggest joy infusion?

Listen to my conversation with Gary called "Joy is the Oxygen" at KateBowler.com/podcasts or wherever you download podcasts.

SUGAR AND TORTURE

READ

MATTHEW 18:2-4

Why is it that it is so much easier to remember the hard times than the good? Spend some time deliberately recalling your very best childhood memories of Advent and Christmas. What sights and sounds and smells come to mind?

The season of joy runs on two things: sugar and torture.

Growing up, my sisters and I built gingerbread houses and decorated them so thoroughly that the powdered sugar dust lingered in the curtains for weeks. We built palaces of icing and cookie sheets. But then the horrible reality set in almost immediately as we recalled The Great Law of Advent.

1 Candy = 1 Day

We could only eat our houses one...piece...at...a...time...one...day... at...a...time.

It was torture.

Family rules (like English Common Law) were developed over time to legislate our concerns.

New rules included:

Gingerbread houses must have structural integrity.

Icing is glue, not its own wall.

No eating your sibling's candy.

No licking other people's candy.

You are not permitted to immediately devour walls that “cave in.” Too many walls had caved in for too many dubious reasons.

On glorious Christmas morning, we would gorge ourselves on stale gingerbread sheets. One year, we built our houses in November—so early that we had to blow all the dust off the roofs of the houses. Then we ate it anyway, of course.

For most of my young life, I counted every day of Advent in gumdrops. Then I became an adult and I forgot how good it can feel to wait.

Advent is technically a time of waiting and preparation for the baby Jesus. The church waits in anxious expectation, repenting of distractions in order to focus on the miracle of a prophecy fulfilled. Advent and Lent share the same liturgical color: purple. Christians wait in the

dark, just for a little while, because we know there is new life, resurrected life, at the end. We wait patiently in the purple time.

When you are in the season of terrible, time is heavily weighted. You experience waiting differently. Sometimes the waiting is torture, but oftentimes it isn't. I feel attuned to every emotional and sensory facet of each kaleidoscopic day. I don't want the Christmas rush. I want the Advent anticipation to go on forever.

A still, dark house is one of the best places to be in Advent. When I can't sleep, I creep out to the living room to be alone with our Christmas tree. I sit in the stillness of my Lego-strewn living room, lit by the twinkly lights, and breathe in the lengthened seconds. Zach will be stumbling out of bed any moment, dressed in Minecraft pajamas, ready to start another gumdrop day.

May your Advent be as sweet and completely absurd.

REFLECT

Why is it that it is so much easier to remember the hard times than the good? Spend some time deliberately recalling your very best childhood memories of Advent and Christmas. What sights and sounds and smells come to mind?

BONUS ACTIVITY GINGERBREAD MEGACHURCHES

The first year after my diagnosis, my mom bought me a gingerbread kit with firm instructions to "Make a megachurch, sweetie." And so I did. So every year, I make a glorious candy congregation for a charismatic man (or WOMAN). She knows how to run an empire. Everyone is welcome as long as the marshmallows don't crash through the ceiling. (Toban does NOT let me spray paint indoors, otherwise the roof would always be gold. THANKS A LOT TOBAN.)

Pull out some gingerbread supplies and make your own megachurch. But please, again this year, please, please tag me @KateCBowler in any photos so I can see. I hope this tradition brings you as much absurd joy as it brings me.

THE FEAST DAY OF ST. LUCIA

READ

JOHN 1:5

December 13, is the Feast Day of St. Lucia, and in Winnipeg on that day the sun sets at 4:27 in the afternoon and won't rise until around 8:30 the next morning. That's 16 hours of darkness, but in even more northern countries like Sweden, the dark lasts even longer. No wonder that Nordic lands love their Lucia Day tradition where children wearing candle-lit crowns process solemnly and carry food (or yet another candle). That's what we need in the dark—the comfort of food, warmth, beauty and light. And learning, or so Merlin said in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, “The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, “is to learn something.” The curiouiser the better.

So when I heard the famous Lucia Day processional song, sung by white-robed Nordic children with candles in their hair, I was very curious. It's the famous Neapolitan song “Santa Lucia.” So how did an Italian song get so Nordic? Read on.

Saint Lucia or Lucy was a Christian virgin of Catania, in Sicily who was martyred in the persecutions of the late third century. After various travels, her relics ended up in Venice where the song “Santa Lucia” is part of the repertoire of the singing gondoliers to this day. Because her feast day fell on December 13

which was the date of the winter solstice before calendar reform, her legend became entwined with the midwinter festivals of various parts of Europe. In Sweden, the story is told of a terrible famine in the Middle Ages which was relieved by the arrival of a ship bearing food and a beautiful, radiant woman in white at the helm; in Syracuse, Sicily, they speak of a famine in the midst of which folk went to the church of St. Lucia to pray whereupon a grain ship sailed into the harbor. In both Italy and Sweden, she represents light and the promise of the renewal of spring. Some scholars say that the Swedish version of Lucia is actually a descendant of the Christ Child gift-bringer, who was the Protestant Reformation's replacement for Saint Nicholas. The Christkindl in Germany, where many of Sweden's Christmas customs originated, was often depicted as a white-clad young girl, and it is said that this figure was adopted by Swedes in the west part of the country to personify the celebrations that traditionally began on December 13. By the early 20th century, Lucia was a hugely popular figure all across Sweden, even to this day. What could we expect to see of Saint Lucia on December 13?

The “Lucy Bride,” a girl dressed in white with a red sash and a crown of candles and



**“The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.”**

— JOHN 1:5

lingonberries, has ceremonial responsibilities in almost every community setting. In the home, she will bring coffee and cakes to her parents. In schools or public institutions, she leads a parade of similarly-clad young women and Star Boys. Across Europe, she will attend bonfires and torchlit parades. In the Tyrol, Lucia is a gift-bringer who delivers presents to girls, while Saint Nicholas attends to the boys.

As every child will tell you, primordial fears rise within us in the darkness, and there is a dark side to the Lucia figure as well. Because the depths of midwinter are believed to be a time of increased demonic activity, Lucia is sometimes identified with witches or monsters. In parts of Germany, she is the Lutzelfrau, a witch who rides the winds and has to be bribed with gifts; in some parts of central Europe, Lucy takes the form of a nanny goat rewarding good children and threatening to disembowel the bad. (Oh dear!) In Iceland, she is identified as an ogre. The night before her feast day is therefore held to be a good time for ceremonies to drive away evil spirits with lights, noise, and incense. At midnight, Austrians believed that a special light, the Luzieschein, appeared outdoors and would reveal the future to those brave enough to seek it out.

And in the grip of those primordial fears, what is it that a child asks for? To hold your hand. To feel the comforting and loving presence of one who is stronger and wiser. Are there fears that rise within you, especially in the midnight hours? You can pray them all directly to God whose love for you is a sure thing. Forever.

REFLECT

Countries in the northern hemisphere are deprived of many hours of sunlight as the world tilts toward Christmas, and many people find this season of long nights difficult. At such times, what comforts do you turn to for solace?

CHRISTMAS LIKE SAINT FRANCIS

READ

PSALM 148

Saint Francis of Assisi had a special bond with creation and how it speaks God's love to us, especially at Christmas. This most remarkable man of the Middle Ages was born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone to a prosperous merchant and his wife in central Italy in 1181. His father nicknamed him Francesco ("Frenchy"), and so the young man became known to history as Saint Francis of Assisi.

After living the carefree life of a rich man's son, Francis underwent a series of religious experiences that caused him to renounce his father's wealth and to embrace a life of poverty and service. He begged for his keep, tended to lepers, and preached a message of love and repentance across the local countryside. Despite his radical approach to property and the environment, Francis attracted large numbers of followers who were eventually organized in the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscans, for men) and the Order of St. Clare (the Poor Clares, for women).

The tender heart of Francis naturally found expression in his attitude toward Christmas. In 1220 in the town of Greccio, Francis set up the earliest living nativity scene (from "Greccio" we get the word "creche", a table nativity scene). It had been customary for centuries for churches to set up a model of a crib near the altar during the Christmas season, but Francis was the first to use real animals, a donkey and an ox, a manger full of straw, and a tiny baby to bring home the long-ago events in Bethlehem and make the incarnation and humanity of Jesus real to the ordinary people.

He prepared a manger and brought hay, an ox and a donkey to the place appointed. Saint Bonaventure describes what happened at that first live nativity scene:

"The brethren were summoned, the people ran together, the forest resounded with their voices, and that venerable night was made glorious by many and brilliant lights and sonorous psalms of praise. Saint Francis stood before the manger, full of devotion and piety, bathed in tears and radiant with joy; the Holy Gospel was chanted by Francis. Then he preached to the people around the nativity of the poor King. Being unable to utter His name for the tenderness of His love, He called Him the Babe of Bethlehem. A certain valiant and veracious soldier, Master John of Greccio, who, for the love of Christ, had left the warfare of this world, and become a dear friend of this holy man, affirmed that he beheld an Infant so marvelous sleeping in the manger, Whom the blessed Father Francis embraced with both his arms, as if he would awake Him from sleep."

The living Nativity scene is a long-enduring tradition that is still carried out 800 years later. We are used to seeing in our Christmas manger scenes that on that holy night when Jesus was born, that the donkey and the ox and the sheep and lambs were all gathered around him, not to feed from the manger, but to worship the tiny newborn king whose bed it had become.

Why was Saint Francis so overwhelmed with love for The Babe of Bethlehem as he stood and worshiped before the manger? It was the fact of God's coming to earth in such humble circumstance, as a tiny infant that won a mighty victory for us—ultimately a victory over death itself. This is the meaning of Psalm 148, the horn of victory raised and the reason for the praises of all creation. And we too, bow in adoration.

REFLECT

In Psalm 148, God receives praise from all created things, including “the wild animals and all cattle.” The manger scene typically shows the baby Jesus lying in a feeding trough with animals drawing near in quiet awe. What is your experience with the nativity scene as part of Christmas worship? Do the animals play a part?

BONUS ACTIVITY FEED THE BIRDS

Another Christmastide example set by Saint Francis that is still observed is the custom of giving animals a special feeding on December 25. Saint Francis, who loved the birds and fishes enough to preach the message of salvation to them just in case they had souls, was a leader in urging good treatment to the animal kingdom. He begged farmers to give their livestock extra food at Christmas in memory of the ox and ass between whom the Baby lay. “If I could see the Emperor,” he said, “I would implore him to issue a general decree that all people who are able to do so, shall throw grain and corn upon the streets, so that on this great feast day the birds might have enough to eat, especially our sisters, the larks.”

In honor of Saint Francis, take some bread outside to feed the birds and squirrels, bunny and deer. Give your pets an extra special treat.

JOYFUL WAITING

READ

LUKE 2:9-11

Six little kids squished together on a couch, smiling and singing—that’s my new favorite way to listen to a carol. They sang happily, with the settled confidence of those who know good things would be coming—Christmas! And all that entailed: presents and special treats and holidays and adventures with cousins perhaps. The tune they sang had a lilting resemblance to a rowdy children’s game or skipping rhyme, though it was an 18th century French Advent carol, “O Come Divine Messiah!” The composer was the Abbé Pellegrin. Although he was called Abbot, he didn’t distinguish himself greatly as a monastic in the order he joined, for he would rather write for operas. In fact it was said of him:

“He was Catholic in the morning and in the evening, idolater, He supped at the altar, and dined at the theatre.”

No matter! The skipping rhythm and boisterous style of his music was the perfect vehicle to express the pre-Christmas happiness of this squished group of carolers.

And the text holds even more. It is full of hopeful expectation, greater than what a child’s mind can fathom. Those of us who have lived longer know how deep the world’s sadness can be, how strong

the grip of tyranny and injustice, and how great is our need for news that good might ultimately triumph.

There should be a word in English for this juxtaposition, the poignant linking of these two kinds of Advent waiting—the innocent confidence of a child in happy expectancy, and the longing of the whole sad earth enraptured as it waits for ultimate cosmic joy. WHY IS THERE NOT A WORD FOR THIS? (She shouted.) This contradiction in conjunction. We need one word to capture the precise overlapping of what is at once simple and complex, assured and yet inconceivable. About how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. Like the parents who sneak downstairs to place gifts under the tree, lovingly chosen, wrapped and hidden away for a time. Like our merciful God who has everything ready for us, the fulfillment of the ages.

The words Advent carol cry for this beautiful completion to begin:

“O Come, divine Messiah! The world in silence waits the day when hope shall sing its triumph, and sadness flee away.”

And when we hear this repeated refrain sung so innocently, so confidently, our own desires rise up and aspire to the heights of child-like hope, ever more confident in the truth of it. That sadness will “flee away” at the dawning of grace that is signaled by the coming of Jesus to earth in peace, in meekness, as a little child.

O come, divine Messiah!

The world in silence waits the day

When hope shall sing its triumph,

And sadness flee away.

Dear Savior haste;

Come, come to earth,

Dispel the night and show your face,

And bid us hail the dawn of grace.

O Christ, whom nations sigh for,

Whom priest and prophet long foretold,

Come break the captive fetters;

Redeem the long-lost fold.

You come in peace and meekness,

And lowly will your cradle be;

All clothed in human weakness

Shall we your Godhead see.

O come, divine Messiah!

The world in silence waits the day

When hope shall sing its triumph,

And sadness flee away.

REFLECT

Luke 2:9-11 is about great news. Think of the best news you could receive today. How would it feel to hear those words?

This kind of joy is huge. It is bigger than all the sadness the world has ever seen or known. It brings all at once, freedom, forgiveness, justice, and grace in the coming of that One, the One in whom all goodness is contained and reflected, in that face.

PRACTICING JOY

READ

MARK 8:34-36

Today is a day for channeling Ebenezer Scrooge who said: “I will honor Christmas every day in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

Practicing joy is an exercise of attention or proclamation. There are some things that are true—about ourselves, the world, or others—that feel too absurd to be true. The wily wisdom of Advent, however, suggests that the very absurdity of these hard-to-believe things may in fact testify to their veracity.

For example, it’s absurdly true that love is a bad investment, if gain is all you’re after. But nevertheless Christians count on a different equation to be true, that if we try to hang on to our lives we lose them, but if we give them for the sake of Jesus and all he stands for, we will save them. Advent is a time to proclaim these unseen certainties by being restlessly creative in celebrating them, proclaiming them.

For example, when I visit a ridiculous roadside attraction for no reason except to be with a friend and leap for joy that we did it, that’s my way of saying isn’t this an amazing life? When I make my gingerbread house in the shape of a mega-church decorated with gold-sprayed pretzels,

that is my way of being absurdly grateful. Joy is in the particulars.

What’s yours? What can be your own particular expression of joy at Christmas that is at the heart of loving with the soft beating heart Jesus gave you.

Hint: It will shake up life as you know it. But I hear you say, didn’t the pandemic already do that? Well, it turns out, every moment is the pivot point for the new that will free you to embrace life as an expression of Christmas as not just pretty good news, but hope in motion. Here are a few traditions for you to consider.

01 Stir-up Sunday.

This is an English tradition that requires that the Christmas pudding be stirred up, with each family member taking a turn—some insist that the stirring must be performed clockwise (to represent the journey of the Wise Men from East to West) and with eyes closed while making a wish. Christmas pudding is traditionally made with 13 ingredients to symbolize Jesus and the 12 Apostles. For those homes that do not make Christmas pudding the tradition can be adapted to any holiday dish that requires a bit of stirring.



**Practicing joy is an
exercise of attention
or proclamation.**

02 Read a book together out loud.

Charles Dickens' masterpiece *A Christmas Carol* is a short novel, full of ghosts and wonderful ideals, which can easily be read out loud in family—size bites in the evenings leading up to Christmas—even on Zoom. Or on Christmas Eve, you could read the “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas,” or any beloved poem or story.

03 Watch some really good Christmas movies.

Scrooge, the 1951 version of *A Christmas Carol*, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *Rare Exports*—a little 2010 touch of fright and humor from Finland, *Elf* (2003), *Dr. Seuss' the Grinch* (2018), and the original Chuck Jones animation of the *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (1964). And to be quite definite, *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie. Or gather round a truly sappy Hallmark Christmas movie and adlib throughout. It could work!

04 Keep in touch.

The use of Christmas cards sent through the mail has declined in recent years thanks to the ease of email but nothing compares to a personal message in one's own handwriting. This is also a way to support charities such as UNICEF who publish seasonal cards.

Your expression of Christmas joy carves out a space in the world. And it has your name on it.

Will you join me?

REFLECT

**What would it look like
for you to practice joy
like a discipline?**



READ

JOHN 17:13

**A
BLESSING
FOR THE
ADVENT
OF JOY**

DAY 21

God, we don't yet have hold of it,
but we can almost feel it—
or at least the memory of it—
the joy that our hearts so long for,
the fulfilling of all our hopes,
the completion of our loves,
the perfection of beauty brought near

Blessed are we
who lift our eyes and recognize
even from afar that it is you.
It was you all along.

Oh God of truth and light,
of hope and joy,
though we do not grasp it fully,
our small steps to know
the way we should go:

It is the way of joy
that delights in love.

And in the meantime,
we wait in expectation,
for the refreshing
you do, the gathering
of all that is, into your heart of mercy.

God have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Spirit have mercy

Alleluia, Christ has
come! And will come
again in glory!

REFLECT

Jesus prays for us: "So
they may have my joy
fulfilled within them."
What is the Jesus-joy
that you would ask to
be fulfilled in you?