

Daily Reflections for Advent



Partying is easy. *Celebrating*, though... that may take a little effort. This booklet is an encouragement toward that. Join with your community, taking a bit more time than you might otherwise... to *celebrate well*. Advent is about anticipating the most radical idea in history. God enters his own creation as a vulnerable child, in order to show the world the extent of his love. If anything is worth celebrating, friends... it's that.

These reflections on celebration are as diverse as the people that wrote them. Most of the time they're not specifically about Christmas. Some are poems, some are explorations of scripture, and some are stories spoken through ink. Some speak of the joy of celebration, and some speak of the challenge of it. All of them have something to offer us as we practice hope together during these weeks. We've taken each individual writing and matched it with a scripture passage at the beginning and prayer/prompt at the end. What strikes you? What stirs you to hope, to peace, to joy, to love? God is speaking. Listen.

So we invite you for 22 days....

Slow down. Sit down. Settle down.

And then well up.

With tears. With joy. With hope. With Jesus.

And maybe, when Christmas finally comes upon us, we'll be ready for His coming. And ready to truly celebrate.

December 2nd

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

-Matthew 1:22-24

Christmas is exciting for a child. There are decorations, a sense of purpose in the air, and anticipation of gifts under the tree.

Becoming an adult hasn't exactly taken the excitement away, but it has changed my perspective on what my celebration is about.

It's not about getting. It's about what I've gotten. It's not about decorations. It's about the Light that I've seen. It's not about busyness and hustle and bustle. It's about the planning that God did before the foundation of the world.

God's plan was always to be with His people. He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. He led his people out of Egypt as a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire. He showed Himself to Job when he needed to be reminded of who God is. He sent Jesus to give us a way to be with Him forever.

Reflecting on learning to celebrate has brought me to think about why I celebrate these days. It's because God made a way for us to be with Him.

-Adam Winters

God, how amazing that you desire to be 'with us'. May we celebrate the gift of your presence today and forever.

December 3rd

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. -Romans 15:13

There are so many things to love about this verse! Many of us have had to rewrite our view of God after hearing the "fire and brimstone" or "Angry Father" version. In this verse, He is called the God of Hope! The prayer is that we may be filled with all **joy** and **peace** *as we trust in Him*. While I am not always the best at trusting in Him, verses like this are a balm to my soul, drawing me back to the truth. That same truth lets me **overflow with hope** - wow! Take that in. As we trust in Jesus, we are filled with joy and peace so much that we overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so I pray for each of you, sisters and brothers, that the God of hope would fill you with joy and peace during this season of Advent as you trust in Him.

-Jessica Sinarski

Jesus, in my inner world and as I interact with others today, fill me with your joy and peace.

December 4th

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

-1 Thessalonians 2:8

This evening we experienced an unexpected time of celebration. We had an extra artificial Christmas tree that we wanted our son to use this year. Last year he didn't get a tree of any kind. To be honest, we actually purchased the extra tree on clearance last year so that we would have one to offer him.

Our son was off today and came by to pick up the tree, but I said I wanted to help set it up with him, so we decided to meet this evening. On the way to his home we picked up the pizza he ordered. He had a fire in his fireplace and we sat in his living room visiting and sharing the fire and pizza. After putting the tree together, we played a game of chess with the set on his coffee table, and followed that with a couple of games of cards. It was a really enjoyable time together.

We ask that the Lord will give us many other opportunities to connect and "celebrate" with others during this Christmas season and throughout the year.

-Joan Neufeld

Jesus, help me notice the opportunities you are providing this season for me to share my life with others.

December 5th

And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he added, "These are true words that come from God."

-Revelation 19:9

During a long road-trip a couple years ago, I stumbled upon some passages in Deuteronomy (chapters 14 & 26) about tithing. Apparently tithing was on a 3-year cycle. The third year, the tithe was given to Levites and those in need. Twice as often, however, in the first and second years, the tithe was designated for celebration and reverence towards God:

"Eat the tithe... in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the Lord your God always... you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice. (Deuteronomy 14:23b, 26b)"

The idea of "eating the tithe" was shocking to me, and challenged me to reconsider the minimal attention that I generally give to celebration. As someone who is focused on the future, accomplishing tasks, and moving on to the next goal, it takes a real effort to stop, reflect, and celebrate. This obscure passage from Deuteronomy showed me that celebrations are not just fluffy amusements, but something of importance to God.

Celebrations are an opportunity to acknowledge the goodness in our lives, and to thank God who is the source of all goodness and "every good and perfect gift." (James 1:17)

-Rachel Gopie

Thank you, God, for giving us so many reasons to celebrate!

December 6th

Isaiah celebrated Jesus by **speaking words of hope**.

*"And because of his experience,
my righteous servant will make it possible
for many to be counted righteous,
for he will bear all their sins." (Isaiah 53:11)*

Elizabeth celebrated Jesus by **showing hospitality**.

*"Why am I so honored,
that the mother of my Lord should visit me?" (Luke 1:43)*

John the Baptist celebrated Jesus by **dancing** in utero.

*"At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her,
and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:41)*

Mary celebrated Jesus with a **song**.

*"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" (Luke 1:46-7)*

Joseph celebrated Jesus with **obedience** to a tough assignment.

*"He decided to break the engagement quietly.
As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a
dream..."*

*When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded
and took Mary as his wife." (Matthew 1:19, 20, 24)*

What can you do to celebrate Jesus while you wait for Christmas?

-Sabrina Justison

*Jesus, give me tangible ways to delight in the goodness of your
coming.*

December 7th

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

-Luke 2:19

I used to throw myself into creating elaborate Pinterest-y themed birthday parties for my boys. Our celebrations were huge and intricately planned and memorable. But by the time they turned eight, I was exhausted. The huge indoor parties had taken their toll, so we decided to do something different that year. We replaced our traditional big party with simple family celebrations. Pancakes with candles, cards created by their little sister, going out to dinner at their favorite restaurant, and lots of extra hugs and cuddles throughout the day. Instead of investing all of our time and energy into a few hours of intense celebration, we ended up taking a thousand little moments throughout their birthday week to anticipate, celebrate, and shower them with love. I remember Keith and I worrying that this shift might make the boys feel like they weren't fully celebrated because of the lack of fanfare. But it turns out they actually felt more special and loved! And by stripping it all away, I was able to learn something important about myself. I realized that the elaborate celebrations were more about others' expectations and my own desires than about honoring and celebrating the birth of my children.

-Bethany Miller

Invite God to free you from the external expectations of the holidays, so that you can love God and love others in the deepest ways.

December 8th

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

-Psalm 118:24

We asked the kids in KidsLife how they have learned to celebrate Jesus during the Christmas season.

Singing songs that remind us about Jesus' birthday. -Sophie Jones

Christmas plays help us remember Jesus! -Abram Judy

Monkey bread shaped like Jesus would help us remember Jesus!
-Sariya Miller

We read a story that leads up to Jesus birth, which is why we celebrate Christmas. -Leah Judy

Shopping for other people's presents makes me think of Jesus' gift. -Judah Miller

When we get presents, it makes me think about how God loves us, like the person who gave us the present loves us. -Emily Winters

When we get presents, it reminds us of the present God gave us of taking away our sins. -Isaac Judy

God, may our faith and celebration mirror the purity and simplicity of a child.

December 9th

No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise

-Ezra 3:13

By all means, my “difficult season” should be over by now. It’s been six years since my Mom passed away; five and a half since I lost my Dad. The incredibly dark and seemingly never-ending period while we waited for our sons to come home from Ethiopia has been over since we all stepped foot off of that plane two and a half years ago. And yet...

Grief is a funny thing, and reminds me of a stone that has been polished over the years. Rough at first, but after lots of turning and working through and over and around, your stone ends up to be fairly smooth and you think you’ve got that sorrow business packed up neatly and tidied away. Yet as you continue to work the stone over in your hand, every now and then a lingering sharp edge catches you off guard and takes your breath away.

Blasted special days and their lingering sharp edges.

It’s not that holidays and big and small events are no longer celebratory. They still are. They are joyful and filled with gratitude, but without taking the time to first acknowledge the gaping hole, the feelings of joy and celebration feel dishonest. As if my heart can’t truly come to the height of celebration, without holding hands with the depth of loss that our family holds. And only then, can I throw my hands up and say, *Let’s celebrate.*

-Gina Judy

Thank you, Lord, for giving us grace to navigate the complicated feelings of joy and pain. It is such a gift that we may be honest with you.

December 10th

He asked, 'What's this you're discussing so intently as you walk along?' -Luke 24:17

In those rough times
in the middle of a work week,
with all the cares of the world on us,
and perhaps the looks and talk between us are choppy,
feelings roiled, churning,
it is as though we are wading across a wide shallow stream
together,
so wide we have forgotten the peace of the near shore
and cannot yet see the far shore:
we walk in the water among the slippery stones
the stream pulling at our bare feet as we move from one slick
foothold to the next,
the sound of the water burbling over rocks, drowning out our
words
and yet we know the other is there;
when you reach out your hand to me my hand is there between
us
and somewhere in our hearts we know we will rest on the
further shore
together close and warm
all of the long perilous crossing forgotten.
-Rob Seward

God, give us peace as we walk with you.

December 11th

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

-James 1:17

When I was young, I was very close to my Mommom, my father's mother. We shared a birthday, we shared a middle name, and we shared almost every weekend together and many weeks during school vacations and summers. When she was diagnosed with cancer, I was devastated. She passed away one October, two months before Christmas. Christmas Eve had always been a big deal in our family, with everyone gathering at her house and what felt like thousands of gifts being passed out and celebrated. We all knew that first Christmas Eve without her would feel strange and empty. But we decided to stick to our tradition, even if it would be less celebratory.

To my surprise, my dear Mommom had determined to make that Christmas Eve joyous no matter what. She had already purchased quite a few gifts for each of us when she passed. It was a moment of unexpected celebration in a sad time. It was still strange and empty, but not quite as strange and empty as I had expected, thanks to a grandmother who valued celebration right up to the end.

-Melanie Winters

God, your gifts are everywhere. May we celebrate your love through generosity with one another, and gratitude of the people and blessings in our lives.

December 12th

“Surely the Lord was in this place, and I wasn’t even aware of it!”...The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it.

-Genesis 28:16, 18

The word “celebrate” evokes thoughts of confetti, clapping, music, special food and drink, a festive atmosphere, and loving people. Party! Rejoice!

But it means so much more than this.

It also means to commemorate, to acknowledge a specific event because it is worth marking.

It also means to honor or show reverence for.

It also means keep, to eulogize, to remember with spoken or written words.

If you find that circumstances or pain or grief make it hard for you to celebrate Christmas with confetti and a party, can you, instead:

- commemorate Christmas, acknowledging the attention we give to the birth of Jesus because it is worth marking?
- show reverence for Christmas, setting aside time for prayer and meditation on scripture, grateful for a God who took on flesh in order to save His children out His great love?
- eulogize Christmas, crafting written or spoken words that remind you and others that Emmanuel means God with us, and that is everything?

-Sabrina Justison

Take a moment and rest in God without guilt or frustration. Invite God to show you new ways of valuing the coming of Jesus.

December 13th

I will sing a new song to you, my God

-Psalm 144:9

I ask God to act; I wait, expectantly, for help.

He sets my feet upon a rock, and gives me a firm place to stand,
he puts a new song in my mouth.

The old song is gone, the new song is powerful, a celebration of
God's love and faithfulness.

He does not lift me onto the rock and leave me. He changes me,
he makes me grow, he shows me new things.

Day after day, a new celebration.

-Ben Meeder

*Take a moment and reflect. What new song God is giving you in this
season?*

December 14th

Then Abraham waited patiently, and he received what God had promised.

-Hebrews 6:15

I am writing this from a waiting room.

While my daughter is under general anesthesia for a minor procedure, I can feel my daddy nerves a little bit on edge while I wait.

A lot of life feels this way right now. Waiting for a break from all the paperwork on my desk. Waiting for the weekend to spend a little more time with my family. Waiting for this. Waiting for that. Wishing it was some time other than right now. I've even been told before that Advent is a season of... waiting.

A friend once told me that we spend a lot of time wishing our lives away, just like I've been doing. Wishing for the weekend, the summer, for something that's not here yet instead of enjoying the moment that we're in.

Yeah.

That's me.

But the Christmas season... Advent... is one of my favorite times of year. I love what's coming. But I love what's already here too. The lights, the anticipation, I love the "right now" almost as much as the "what's coming." I can celebrate while I wait, not just when I get there.

And you know what? There is a lot I love in the other times too. I like spending time with my kids, even if it's just getting them ready for bed. I like my work, even if it means deadlines and paperwork. God is just as present in those moments, His love is just as available, and there are gifts to celebrate in the waiting as well.

-Brandon Zinnato

Take a moment and consider the gifts you have in your life right now. Ask God to help you celebrate the beauty of the present along with the hope of the future.

December 15th

*"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.*

-Luke 1:46-48

I was in the middle of a very messy divorce, and my weeks were filled with angry phone calls, threats, court appearances, and a lot of uncertainty about the future. During these difficult months, I had been reaching out to God in ways I never had before. An older man at work had befriended me, and "Granny" and I began to read the Bible together at lunchtime. I was praying, and God was answering my prayers, giving me peace in the middle of the chaotic circumstances. I was reading the Bible and finding that its words were changing the way I thought about everything. I looked for a church, and among my new friends I found a welcome and support that drew me to the point of deciding to follow Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

I remember vividly how excited I was to be baptized, to proclaim my faith in Jesus Christ the way He told His followers to. My believer's baptism came right in the midst of the mess of my divorce and great uncertainty about the next season of my life, but I was so excited to celebrate my decision to follow Jesus in spite of the hard stuff. Choosing to publicly celebrate something that was so absolutely, truly good in spite of circumstances that felt so very bad brought new energy to my life across the board, and sharing that celebration of baptism with the brothers and sisters who had helped me come to Christ created a special bond between us.

-Fred Justison

*Thank God for a moment in your life when you sensed His rescue.
Consider what it would look like to take a new step of faith with
Jesus.*

December 16th

But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. .. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as His adopted children.

-Romans 8:20, 23

I can't tell you how many times this year I've whispered, "Your kingdom come, Lord." When I listen to the news and hear of people devalued and dehumanized, "Your kingdom come, Lord." When I hear of another mass shooting, innocent lives cut down en masse, "Your kingdom come, Lord." When I see desperate people on every street corner, "Your kingdom come, Lord." When doubt and hurt overwhelm my mind and the minds of my family, "Your kingdom come, Lord." When loss and mental illness and pain fill the lives of those around me, "Your kingdom come, Lord."

Advent is a time of waiting, the time between identifying the need (a Savior) and the need being fulfilled (Christ is born!) I have felt the weight of an advent season all year. The needs are great, but the need is being fulfilled in small ways, bit by bit, as each of us cling to the hope of His kingdom come, and as we work to bring what little shalom we can to this sick and hurting world. We celebrate Your kingdom come, Lord.

-Melanie Winters

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

December 17th

So I did as He told me and found the potter working at his wheel. But the jar he was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so he crushed it into a lump of clay again and started over.

-Jeremiah 18:3-4

Christmas was coming. It had been only a week since Jacob and Leigha had disappeared. Mentally ill and unwilling to accept help, my 22 year old son and his wife had stolen a large sum of money, broken into our home and vandalized property, and fled. And now our family was trying to make plans for Christmas.

We discussed our options and decided that we all wanted to be together; there is healing to be found in community. We did NOT want to do traditional gift-giving; it felt like the right time for a new way to celebrate. So we decided on a Silly or Sentimental exchange with a \$5 limit per person. Handmade and free gifts were best; storytelling and laughter were encouraged!

On Christmas Day, there was a hint of anxiety in the air. Would this feel like a celebration, or a lame attempt to put pain out of our minds because we're "supposed" to be happy at Christmas?

In no time, the anxiety passed. We found ourselves fully immersed in the newness of this context - what could we share with each other about our intentions behind these gifts? Who was going for the biggest laugh? Who was aiming for surprise? Who was reminding us of the sweetest moments in our memories about our family?

The gifts were...diverse! A book of Fred's weird sayings. T-shirts with Sharpie-designs that captured the quirks of each wearer. Poetry, framed for display, reminders of how precious each one was to the rest of us. Recipes capturing in yummy symbolism the personality of the recipient. Inside jokes, stories some of us had all but forgotten, and lump-in-the-throat affirmations of the love we have for each other because of shared experiences.

What started as, "How do we even celebrate this year?" turned into an afternoon of affection and sincere commitment to keep moving forward and loving each other well, come what may.

Sometimes the old traditions don't fit the need. Sometimes trying something new is the most powerful way to celebrate. And always, sincerity is best. If we can truly, honestly own the reality of pain in our world and choose to celebrate the beauty in spite of it, it's triumphant.

-Sabrina Justison

Is there something you can honestly own as painful in your life and invite God to make something new out of it?

December 18th

You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail.

-Proverbs 19:21

My personality is such that I'm always looking for ways to better myself. One flaw to this approach is that it can be difficult to celebrate, given the thinking that celebration is time wasted on memorializing so-called milestones that are only halfway there. But I've started to realize that my difficulty stems not from missing key milestones but from the missing the nuance in everyday choices I make. Specifically, when I'm faced with common mishaps, I can either get frustrated by my inability to be "better" or, instead, learn to see what God is doing in the midst of everything:

- If I sleep through my alarm, do I lament that I still haven't taught myself to go to bed early or do I see God granting me an extra 30 minutes of sleep?

-When my plans for the day get messed up, do I blame myself for not having the foresight to account for the unknown or do I acknowledge that God may want me to experience something else that day?

-If I accidentally delete an important email I was typing up, do I get angry that I wasn't more focused, or do I see God breaking up my modus operandi by prompting me to speak to the email recipient in a different way?

Strange as it may be, learning to see God in the midst of my striving has been the catalyst for giving me reason to celebrate; through all those little moments where I see God watching out for me, I can celebrate knowing that God is redirecting me closer to Him.

-Ian Yue

Your plans are so much better than my striving for improvement.

Thank you for directing and redirecting me.

December 19th

The disciples scolded the parents for bothering Him. But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children." And He placed His hands on them and blessed them.

-Matthew 19:13-14

Years ago, when our oldest daughter was five, she came up with the grand plan to make breakfast for Jared and myself. Her younger brother was three at the time, but she felt certain they could pull it off. The night before the big breakfast surprise I had found Leah's detailed list of things to do for us the following morning. It included things like, "Decrate" "Make toast" and "Set the table" and more alarmingly, "Light candles, maybe matches?" (We may or may not have had a talk on fire safety after that one!)

I have always loved my daughter's desire to celebrate and her ability to find a reason to make something ordinary into a fully decorated cause for celebration. (Ask me about the circus she orchestrated for us a few weeks ago.)

It's funny how our ordinary parenting celebrations can change over the years. From the thrill of watching little ones learn to sit up on their own, or sleep through the night, or take their first steps, to witnessing your kids finish (and enjoy) their first chapter book, get a P.R. in a race, or finally meet that juggling goal with their soccer ball that they have been practicing forever.

Nowadays, when breakfast surprises occur, they include actual cups of coffee and plates full of scrambled eggs and toast. They may have a little less fanfare and fire safety hazards than before, but are incredibly celebratory in our kids' ability to make us real food and not burn the house down.

-Gina Judy

Lord, You welcome us to "decrate" and "make toast" in celebration of You. Thank You that we are Your beloved children.

December 20th

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." -

Lamentations 3:21-25

My faith has been greatly tested this year with many medical crises. I had given up hope and felt nothing but anguish and despair. I was angry and I was tired of fighting. I felt numb. I wasn't sure that I wanted to go on living. Depression cloaked any bit of light and love in my life. Every day felt so dark. I was barely able to go through the motions. I felt more like a spectator than a participant in my own life. It took every ounce of energy to drag myself through the day. Slowly over time I began to find the strength to pray again. I believe that the prayers of others lifted me throughout this long winter of my soul. I am certain that throughout the darkness, God was with me.

I am now appreciating the beauty and love in my life. I am treasuring the gift of time that I have been given with my loved ones. I've begun challenging myself with goals and reveling with small victories. I am constantly reminded that every day there are a million reasons to celebrate. Every day is a gift from God.
-Denise Levering

Thank You for Your unfailing presence beside me. Open my eyes, Lord, to see You there at work in me every day.

December 21st

"At night we may cry, but when morning comes we will celebrate."
-Psalm 30:5

A friend asked me today how I was feeling. "I feel good today"; I told him, and the first two lines of the old hymn came to mind. *"My life flows on in endless song; Above earth's lamentation..."*

When my 24-year-old daughter died of sepsis in 2014, the only meaningful words of consolation I could hear came from my twin brother, a licensed therapist. "I can't say anything that will make you feel better now, but I can promise you this: you will not always feel this bad." I didn't believe it at the time. How could I ever recover from this grief? How could I ever feel joy again, or feel anything other than this crushing sense of loss?

And I didn't. Not for a long time. Every autumn when the children dressed up in costumes and went door to door seeking treats, I cringed and fought off depressing memories of my little girls in princess dresses and angel wings. I couldn't bear to hear girls singing in a choir. Every time I looked up and saw the half moon, which shone the night she died, I remembered and felt that blast of sorrow. So many tears. I still can't put up a Christmas tree, because all the ornaments hold memories of my little girl.

I survived. I did not feel anger at God, so much as just sorrow. My pastor helped by being with me, by listening, and by refraining from offering Bible quotations meant to console. I worked with a counselor to challenge some irrational thoughts I was having. I blamed myself, which was producing feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide. My wife cried with me, and reminded me that Jesus cried too, at the sorrow of loss in this life.

Then sometime last year, I realized that I had had a good day, and that I felt good. Maybe it was after swimming at the beach, or biking with my darling wife. I began to see the glory in the beauty of the natural world again. Sometimes when I would feel

a little wave of joy I would feel guilty, like I had just forgotten my daughter. But I also knew that she would be the first one, if she were still here, to tell me to stop moping around and go back to living. "Have some fun Dad, would you?" I could hear her say with her quick laugh.

She is always with me now, day and night. Her laughter, her heartfelt sobbing, her excitements, her many friends, and her songs. Always singing, it seems now, songs of joy and songs of loss; laughing, singing and sometimes crying, that was my little Anna.

And today I sit here at my desk on a crisp and sunny November day, the leaves nearly gone from the trees, remembering her with joy, and tears. Now I think of her quick smile, her sharp wit, and adventurous spirit and her deep feelings of the joys and sorrows of the world.

So now when that half-moon shines down, I hear my Anna. She chides me in her fun-loving way: "Lighten up, Dad! Have fun, would you?" then breaking into the bridge of the song (because she never liked to follow the usual order of things):

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging;
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?*

-Rob Seward

God, give me perseverance in each season to wait for your joy, and to welcome it when it comes.

December 22nd

"Look, God's home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them."

-Revelation 21:3

His name shall be called "Immanuel".

"God with us".

It's the heartbeat of the Advent story. God, "in flesh", making his dwelling with us. Right where he wants to be.

But it's not just the heartbeat of the Advent story, it's the heartbeat of the Bible story. The opening pages begin with God creating a world filled with beauty and goodness; God is right there in the middle of the garden, with his people, right where he wants to be.

Jump forward to the time of Israel's exodus from slavery. They travel through the desert region in 12 groups, or tribes. Three tribes to the north, three to the east, three to the south, and three to the west. And then there was God's presence with them, in the tabernacle, in the middle of them all. Right where he wanted to be.

Now flip to the end of the story. Where is all of this story headed? The book of Revelation makes this statement in the closing pages: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God'" (21:3)

It's a beautiful statement in the middle of a beautiful chapter, that talks about the end of the story where God ends up in the middle of his people. Right where he wanted to be all along.

Some churches have tried to embody this. Instead of a worship set up where the pastor is in front, they experimented with a new way of set up. They have tried "worship in the round", where

the platform is in the middle of the seating. The worship leaders in the middle, with the community all around.

Only a few have been able to make “worship in the round” work. Many in the audience feel awkward because there are people on the other side of the platform looking at them. What if their nose itches in the middle of the message? What if the pastor is off his game and they get a bit sleepy? No one likes having people watch when your head bobs in the worship gathering.

It’s awkward.

Most pastors don’t like it either. It can be uncomfortable having people sitting all around you as you teach. (Ask me sometime about the time I preached a sermon only to discover at the end that the entire seat of my pants was torn open. And yes, this story involves a choir who was behind me the entire time. True story.)

Worship in the round is awkward.
Nevertheless, it’s a powerful image.

It’s a powerful image of where God wants to be. It’s where he has wanted to be from the beginning. It’s where he intends to be in the end. It’s where he wants to be all along.
It’s where he wants to be with you right now. In the middle of your garden. In the middle of your desert. In the middle of your success. In the middle of your failure. In the middle of your blessing. In the middle of your curse. Right there.

It’s where he wants to be.
It’s where he has always wanted to be.
-Bill Heider

Lord, stop me from carelessly setting You to the side. Christ, be the center of my life.

December 23rd

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to the Most High. It is good to proclaim your unfailing love in the morning, your faithfulness in the evening."

-Psalm 92:1-2

"A child kicks its legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough... It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again," to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again," to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike: it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

G.K. Chesterton



Recently, I've been looking for quotes to inspire clients who suffer from mental illness. While doing so, I've (re)discovered G.K. Chesterton. To my surprise and delight, I did not find many platitudes to lift the spirit

(a temporary high), but instead have found myself submerged in truths (and

quandaries) so substantial, I'm full to the brim with wonder at

our God. I am always delighted to discover that what I consider work (because reading Chesterton IS work) becomes light when visited by the Spirit. I love this idea that the "abounding vitality" and "fierce and free spirit of youth" might be found in the monotonous and laborious tasks of our daily life when we celebrate God's untiring efforts in creating for us each new day.
-Rachel England (original collage also created by Rachel)

I am Yours, Lord. I want to joyfully praise You every morning, and do it again at bedtime!

December 24th

"Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before Him, singing with joy. Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are His. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture."

-Psalm 100:1-2

I celebrate the new farmer renting the field, who decided to plant a winter crop. When I look out the window, I see a young green that reminds me of spring.

I celebrate that I'm learning, slowly, to not spend all my time in my head, but to stop and be aware of the heater running in the background, the smell of pine, my own breath.

I'm learning to celebrate life and growth, mostly with gratitude for an awareness of the small things, even while living with the knowledge of impending death for me and my loved ones. Holding onto gratitude is the only way I want to live.

I'm learning that celebration feels a lot like gratitude, a gratitude that you share with others.

I celebrate books and learning and growth. I'm amazed at the process by which our brains decode symbols on a page, which contain ideas for our minds to digest, which become part of our understanding of the world and the stories by which we live.

I celebrate a community of people whose stories about God are a bit different from many. They tell stories about God being present and at work in the world. They tell stories about learning to see glimpses of God, and they say, "God has been teaching me this." A community who believes God's work of redemption and restoration in the world might just include them, so how can they help?

I celebrate a God whose love feels like delight, not judgement. A God who wants to spend time with me when I pray. A God

whose Spirit whispers to my soul if I care to pay attention. A God who loves the world, the dirt and microbes and sunlight and mosses and carrots and birds and people. A God whose work is surprising and is never what we expect. A God for whom death is not the end, and who invites me to participate in resurrection.
-Tori Meeder

God, may I notice Your presence in the mundane as well as the extraordinary, celebrating every day the always-extraordinary, redeeming love that is the essence of who You are!