



# not Of This World

Advent Reflections  
~2021~

"Surprise!" Everyone shouts as an unsuspecting person walks into a party on their birthday. After a moment of shock and maybe a little fear, a smile emerges as the recipient realizes that this is a beautiful moment, and it's time to celebrate.

The season of Advent is a season of anticipation. It's a time of waiting expectantly for God to be revealed. And the reveal is indeed a surprise... occurring over and over again throughout our lives. It's valuable to go through the journey of Advent each year because although we may know the story, we still need time and space to prepare ourselves to receive it. And we need to be reminded that if we receive Jesus fully, it will both shock and thrill us.

Jesus surprises us with new perspectives on God and an upside down perspective of what is really valuable in this world. The coming reflections are the words of our own community members as we all reflect on the surprising ways of Jesus and his kingdom. They all serve to prepare us for the good news of *Immanuel, God with us*, if our hearts are open and our spirits are willing. So as we learn again to love God and love one another this Advent, we travel together with a spirit that says, "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

**Peace,  
Keith**

## **November 28th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him.*

#### **Lamentations 3:25**

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#### **Written by Elizabeth Townsend**

I have taken over one of my grown children's bedrooms as a home office. It is on the second floor of my house, and I have put my desk right in front of a double window. My house sits on a bit of a slope, so the view out of this second story window feels a bit like I am working in a tree house. I am up with the birds, watching them fly, and listening to them sing all day long. It is a completely delightful view. I think it shouldn't surprise me every day, but it does. The elements of trees and birds seem simplistic in my mind, but almost every day, at some point, I am surprised by just how glorious such simple things can be. Maybe it's the beauty of the leaves, or the swaying branches, or the colors of a bird, but on a daily basis, I am startled by the smile these things bring to my face.

I consider myself someone who has a healthy gratitude practice, but my office view is not the only way God has been surprising me with beauty lately. I find myself getting caught by surprise at how good something tastes. I am overcome at the thought of how much a friendship means. I am overwhelmed by how beautiful God's Kingdom is. Not just creation, but people too. In the midst of all the fighting and disconnect, people are pursuing truth. They are choosing to love and finding ways to serve each other. Most days, I am simply amazed at the beauty and strength of humankind.

Advent can feel stressful as we balance holiday expectations with day-to-day reality. It also feels somewhat predictable. I feel like I know the elements that hold the next few weeks. I know the cookies I will bake, the movies I will watch and the traditions I will participate in. This year, I am finding that in anticipating the season, I also can't wait to be surprised. There will be beauty that comes alive. There will be new understandings of seemingly simplistic things. There will be smiles on my face and deep joy in my heart over surprises I didn't see coming.

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*Give me wisdom to balance my expectations with my reality, Lord, and never forget to notice with joy the beautiful surprises you have in store for me today.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **November 29th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*

#### **Genesis 50:20**

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#### **Written by Fred Justison**

Joseph said this to his rotten brothers who had tried to kill him and sold him as a slave, but years later his life of slavery had led him to be freed and put in a place of power to help that whole area of the world survive a famine.

Corrie and Betsy Ten Boom, Dutch sisters whose family hid Jewish people from Nazis in WWII, ended up in a concentration camp. Their barracks, a place where they prayed with countless women and taught them about Jesus in spite of the camp's rules against sharing the gospel, was overwhelmingly infested with fleas. Originally feeling as if the fleas were just the last straw on top of everything else they had to endure, Betsy helped Corrie see that it was actually the flea infestation that was keeping the guards away from their barracks; they were raiding every other barracks in the camp and executing anyone sharing faith in Jesus as they were.

COVID - there is so much that is rotten about the pandemic. Early on, I wondered how our church would survive, would stay connected as a community, when the pandemic forced us to stay at home. Zoom was hardly the same as gathering in person, but we started using it and got really good at it. Sunday Celebration Gatherings. Noon Prayer.

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. The Prayer Class. We not only found a way to still be connected, we got used to using Zoom, and now even when we can meet in person again, we continue Zoom as well.

Now that Sabrina and I are traveling so much, now that we've incorporated Zoom at LifePath, we get to be there to worship with everyone at LifePath. Zoom was a lame substitute for real gathering, something that many people resented very much, but it is something God unexpectedly used for good for us.

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*Shake up my negative conclusions about things that I don't like in my life, Jesus, and help me see you at work in everything.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **November 30th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.  
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
He burns the shields with fire.  
He says, "Be still, and know that I am God..."*

### **Psalm 46:9-10**

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### **Written by Kristi Meadows**

In the days before Jesus was born, the Israelites held God's promises. Based on the scriptures, they could have found Jesus on the day of his birth, lying in the manger. Yet, due to their expectations they were waiting for something else and in their waiting they missed the miracle.

As a child I was always confused how an entire country of people could miss such an important event; an event that was foretold and didn't have to be missed. Then I learned more stories, of Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), Simeon (Luke 2:25-32), the Magi (Matthew 2:1-2) – the people who listened to the stirrings within them did not miss the miracle.

This time of year my life is a bit chaotic, in addition to gratefulness and awe (which I schedule time to feel) I also need to fit in traditions, celebrations, obligations and busy. Would I recognize a stirring within me? Would I hear the whispers of the Holy Spirit over the raging storm that is my life?

The scripture above is one of my sisters' favorite verses. She has told me – everyone jumps to the calming release within the command of verse 10 but I couldn't get there without verse 9. If God can make wars stop, He can stop the wars inside my head. He can silence my chaos – and only then am I able to be still and praise Him.

All year, but especially right now, I need to allow Jesus to quiet the chaos so that I can be still in His presence. Then, even if my expectations are set in the wrong direction, if I'm able to hear the Holy Spirit's stirrings, I won't have to miss the miracles.

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*Jesus, calm my heart, slow my breath, still my mind, and give me eyes to see today.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 1st**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

### **Matthew 11:28**

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### **Written by Lynn Moss**

At this time last year, I had just returned from a month-long hospitalization in upstate New York for a life-threatening illness related to 40 years of living well with Type 1 diabetes. Jesus brought me back and has continued to give me strength on days that I've had none, patience when it has worn through to the fibers of my being, and guidance on my journey through this segment of my life as some of the pressures just have not let up.

I am sustained by remembering that I can lay down my burdens for Jesus to carry for a bit when I need recovery time. As I continue to recover physically and emotionally, and find myself calling out "Why me? Why does everything have to be so very difficult? I know some of my stressors have abated, but I want more to be gone!", I remember that I am not alone, but have Jesus to hold my hand and soothe me.

When this sort of epiphany enters my being, it enters as an unexpected calmness and re-centering which I embrace with love. Thank you, Lord, for loving me and staying with me always.

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*Help me sense your comfort and strength as I face whatever today may bring.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 2nd**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

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

**Luke 2:19**

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### **Written by Kendra DeMicco-Lovins**

*Kendra was an integral part of the first expression of LifePath Church back in 2012 when we met only in living rooms. She and her husband now live in Colorado.*

At dinner with friends a few weeks ago, someone asked the table: "What would be your ideal? What would represent a 'dream come true' for you in regards to your work & life?"

One friend thought for a moment and responded, "I am kind of done thinking like that. I am learning that God knows my longings and hopes and I can rest in trusting each offering and invitation as they come."

This casual defiance of a question has sat with me for a month and has begun to work its way into my being in a shaping way.

Over the last few years, I've cultivated a way of being which has more often invited me into a place of urgency and confusion than into a place wonder and trust.

A veracious desire to figure things out, seemed to rob me of the joy of relishing in each step as the path unfolds before me. There is mystery to be uncovered in the life of following Jesus, to be sure, but the mystery becomes a task-master when it becomes a puzzle to solve instead of a wooing to be responded to.

I had no idea how deeply this misunderstanding had fatigued me over time, and how profoundly I had missed the heart of God in the midst of it.

As my husband and I prepare to welcome a new little one into the world, and as we, the church, prepare for the season of Advent, I sense that Jesus is inviting us each into a season of rest.

We can rest, knowing that we can trust Jesus with the things to come, allowing us to be fully present to this Holy moment.

We can rest, knowing that our unfulfilled longings and aching questions are held by the kindest love that the world has ever known.

We can rest, trusting that the heart of God is for us, preparing our path as we have the courage and faith to keep stepping forward.

Carla Harding captured this sense of abiding rest in Jesus so well through this prayer:

*"Today I rest in the blessing of meekness. I don't have to fight to make my own way or shout to make my voice heard. Jesus, you go before me. You prepare a place for me. I rest knowing that the earth is my inheritance."*

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***Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)***

## **December 3rd**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*See, I am doing a new thing!*

*Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*

*I am making a way in the wilderness*

*and streams in the wasteland.*

### **Isaiah 43:19**

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### **Written by Sabrina Justison**

From birth through my twenties and thirties, I lived in a church culture shaped by a belief in patriarchy. I bought the lies, hook, line, and sinker, and for many years was truly convinced that women with leadership gifts and teaching ability needed to raise lots of children in order to have purpose in life. (No, I'm not kidding.)

Lots of life happened, and as I gradually shed those chains and stopped hiding myself for fear of rebuke, I was recognized as a pastor in our community here at LifePath. It was terrifying to begin to contribute to the conversation, a voice in my head still trying to whisper that women needed to be silent. But because this community is so good at loving each other in the midst of our awkwardness, I began to thrive, to find my feet. I could even look back and notice all of the pastoring that the Good Shepherd had done through me in the lives of people over the years before LifePath, people I had never even realized I WAS shepherding, because I didn't think that women could do that.

And then my son murdered a woman. Her life was over, and life as I knew it was over.

I reassured God that I understood; His plan for me as a pastor had only been for a brief season. I wasn't mad at Him. It was good while it lasted. He was welcome to do something else with me now. I was a big girl, and I chose to trust Him.

I met with Keith to resign. I was grateful for the couple of years of his mentoring in leadership, but that season had come to an end with this catastrophic turn of events. Keith listened. He felt for me. And he told me, with all the love of Jesus in His voice, that I seriously needed to, "Just STOP it, puh-leeze. Honestly, Sabrina. Just stop."

Three and a half years later, I find myself in the role of "Prison Pastor at Large." An entirely new type of prison ministry is being created before my eyes as I uncertainly take one step after another, following Jesus into

new territory. What took so long to birth in my life in the first place ('cause women need to sit down and shut up), and what had surely ended in metaphorical death with Ms. Kelley's literal death, is, instead - astoundingly - growing and thriving and building the kingdom of God.

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*Jesus, there are so many ways that I feel disqualified or unusable. Yet I trust your redemptive work to continue to use me even in my brokenness.*

***Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)***

## **December 4th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*She'll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us).*

### **Matthew 1:23**

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### **Written by Sean Ponte**

I think it is safe to say I've been feeling a bit tired and worn out. I cannot look at social media or what's going on in the world around me without feeling darkness and a loss of hope. How are we so divided?

I'm so thankful for the Advent Season, it draws me in to the reminder of "Immanuel"

I'm still feeling the darkness and that hope is lost but I rest in Immanuel.

Resting in Immanuel helps me to believe in a hope not seen. Resting in Immanuel helps me to stop and take a breath and remember the words He spoke to his disciples

*"And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

If I'm being honest I need to live in the Advent Season and draw close to Immanuel all year.

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*Thank you for your unfailing presence with me, Jesus. Help me to rest in you.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 5th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.*

### **Psalm 16:11**

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#### **Written by Tori Meeder**

At some point during the past year, a question came to visit me.

What if life - specifically, my life - is actually awesome? Wouldn't it be a shame if I had a fantastic, amazing life, full of everything I could want and need, and I didn't realize it? Appreciate it? Relish it?

I spend a lot of time feeling dissatisfied. Imperfect. Less than. Stressed. Like I had better get it all together, much more together, because I am just not enough.

So remembering this question helps me to pause now, to sometimes interrupt my thinking patterns and foul moods. I don't mean that I'm unaware that life is brutal, messy, loss-riddled, and painful. I don't mean this question as a form of denial; I'm talking about both/and. I'm talking about lifting up my eyes and realizing that God calls this world good. I don't have to continually strive and prove and hustle. God calls me beloved.

What if life is actually awesome?

I want to be awake to the awe, to rightly value what Mary Oliver calls my "one wild and precious life."

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*Teach me to embrace the both/and of my life, Lord, and give me the courage to celebrate the goodness with real joy.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 6th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

**Isaiah 9:2**

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### **Written by Nate Ransil**

I grew up in the "smells and bells" traditions of the Catholic church, where the seasons of advent and lent served as "on ramps" to the major holidays in the liturgical calendar. Every year on 4 successive Sundays, I'd watch purple and pink candles be lit with sequential significance, as advent themes were revisited. But mostly that season of reflective somberness felt like a buzzkill to 4<sup>th</sup> grade me - why live in the past, and "pretend" to wait for Jesus, when we knew he'd already come? Why not just cut to the chase, and get the Christmas party started?

I can't say that my advent practices have matured much since then, but my perspective is starting to shift, so perhaps there is hope?

Yes, the messiah has come. God (is) with us. His kingdom is inaugurated, but not yet fully realized. So we still see violence and oppression. Racism, nationalism, classism, sexism and all the other "isms" we've made into idols. And the more we see, the more we resonate with the people of advent. Waiting. Hoping. Walking in darkness, but seeing a great light. Come Lord Jesus.

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*Jesus, sometimes it feels like we have no need to wait, and other times it feels like we're always waiting. Help us look for you with both patience and expectation today.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 7th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

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### **Written by Brandon Zinnato**

Today in our Meal Community, we talked about how some of our beliefs had swung back and forth like a pendulum throughout our lives. Several of us had followed some version of this pattern: We began our walk with Jesus in a very fundamentalist or ritualized faith, then over the years swung to a less ritualized, less restricted faith, only then to find unexpected comfort or value in the practices we had left behind. The pendulum swings back and forth.

But pendulums *don't* just swing back and forth. Over the course of a day, the plane they swing through rotates. My daughter and I have watched the pendulum at the Franklin Institute, where a series of pins set up around it slowly get knocked over due to this slowly changing swing.

It seems like a fairly common faith journey (at least in our MC) to start with a firm set of beliefs and assumptions that get challenged and changed. And at least one or two people shared that while this can be valuable (you learn to love and find value in those with very different faith expressions than you), it can also be very disorienting. Where do we find Jesus in all of this?

Here's a thought: when gray areas get uncomfortable, when it's hard to find the "third way" between two schools of thought, or when you're just feeling pushed back and forth by life... That pendulum that is not only swinging back and forth, but doing so over an ever-changing axis, is always passing through the same center point. There is always a point in the middle that the pendulum is returning to and (given enough time) where it will eventually come to rest. Let's try to make that place Jesus. And, when it's hard to say what that means, let's make that place love.

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*Lord Jesus, love incarnate, free me from fear as my faith is expressed in familiar and unfamiliar ways, but let my life path always center in you.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 8th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*

### **Romans 7:6**

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### **Written by Britt Hernandez**

As a child I learned faith meant following the rules, living in my little box and keeping far away from the “ways of the world”. Being a member of the church required following a series of rules and regulations in order to “gain Christ’s favor”. You were saved by grace, sure, but the only way to prove that was by your fruit. Over time, I began to see that the “Christian” love surrounding me was conditional and based only on what one could offer. But then I truly met God and his people and I learned that God and the church are not conditional. The “outside world” is not something to avoid, but to care deeply about and love, just as Jesus did. God does not look for us to fit inside any little box before he loves us. He meets us where we are. He loves who we are. Nothing we do or do not do will change that. God sees me and he sees you and he loves us wholeheartedly. All we need to do is look to him and we will find favor in him.

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*Jesus, thank you for offering me a love that unconditional. Teach me to live freely, willing to offer others the same love I have received.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 9th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

### **Galatians 6:9**

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#### **Written by Ian Yue**

Over the past few months, God has provided me many opportunities to extend love and grace to others when I really didn't want to. Most of these instances may have seemed small or even unnoticeable to the recipient, but if you were able to peek inside my head, you would have seen a struggle — a struggle to overcome what I perceived to be an inconvenience, an annoyance, or a grudge. Isn't it incredible that expressing even the smallest gestures of God's heart can sometimes feel like a major battle within ourselves?

Interestingly enough, I discovered that as I continued to work through the struggle and show love to others, my demeanor started to change. I found myself becoming a more empathetic and patient person. Things that would normally trigger me started to feel less necessary to fight. And while the struggle to show love and grace to others didn't go away, the *frequency* at which I would *feel* that struggle lessened.

The Church likes to celebrate the big things that God has accomplished in our lives — and for good reason! But by just focusing on the big things, it's possible to lose sight of the small ways God slowly works at our hearts — like realizing that, over the span of months, it's somehow become easier to love others. I, too, can be caught up in the temptation to just focus on how God is transforming my life in big ways. In that sense, God surprised me by demonstrating that the "slow burn" of personal growth can be even more significant than the big things I've been looking out for.

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*Strengthen me to continue in the slow burn of personal growth, and help me celebrate the transforming work of your spirit in my life, Jesus.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 10th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.*

**-Matthew 7:11**

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### **Written by Chase Herman**

"A God you understood would be less than yourself" – Flannery O'Connor

When I graduated from high school, my father gave me a rite-of-passage letter with a few ideas that he wanted me to always remember. One of them was the observation that unexpected answers to prayer are often the first sign that God is involved in one's life, which I have found to be both reassuring and challenging. I interpret this to mean that God cares about us and seeks to bring about the ultimate good, regardless of our ability to discern it, but it challenges my assumptions. How do we know what God is doing in our lives? In principle, can we ever really know? How then do we relate to God? Such questions have more than once discouraged me from praying – if I can't understand what God is doing, why bother asking? After all, so many of my prayers could be construed as selfish.

As we reflect on the surprising and unexpected ways that God works, I'm reminding myself that prayer may change things, but prayer also changes me. The very action of asking God for help may be what is necessary to liberate my heart for God, even when I don't think there will be an answer. Like a father investing himself in a child, I believe God has always given me what I needed for spiritual formation – not necessarily what I wanted! As Robert Barron put it, echoing Augustine, God may not answer our prayers in the way that we expect "because he wants our hearts to expand."

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*Jesus, I'm at peace with not knowing everything, because I trust your goodness and care. Keep drawing me closer to you so that I can reflect your image.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 11th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

#### **1 Thessalonians 5:11**

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#### **Written by Doug Miller**

Halfway through the Boston marathon, someone I had never seen before yelled "You can do it, Doug!" from the side of the road. I found out later that some of the locals buy programs and memorize a few of the 37,000 names and numbers, just hoping to catch one of them running by to offer some encouragement. Marathoners love these encouragement overachievers because we know their support can get us to the finish line.

Words of encouragement appear throughout the Christmas story. The angel encouraged Mary with the words, "You have found favor..." The unexpected news that barren and aged Elizabeth was pregnant, encouraged Mary to believe the angel's words to her that "nothing is impossible with God." Mary's visit encouraged Elizabeth and filled her with the Holy Spirit. No wonder she interpreted her baby's movement as a "leap for joy." The angel encouraged the shepherds by announcing that socio-economic status does not exclude one from God's kingdom, with the words "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all the people**." The devout, elderly prophetess Anna encouraged all who were anticipating the coming Messiah, as she came out of the temple and spoke about this month-old child-redeemer.

Encouragement takes effort, and requires eyes that see beyond ourselves, especially when we are tired and worn out. But watching Kylan and Judah, (and their cross-country teammates) still exhausted from their own race, cheer on their yet-to-finish comrades reminds me that it's possible.

Advent seems like a perfect time for each of us to look around, encourage, and shatter a little darkness.

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*Open my mouth with cheers for those who need to be cheered, Lord. Open my eyes to see opportunities to encourage.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 12th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*He who has ears, let him hear. (NIV)*

*Are you listening to me? Really listening? (MSG)*

**Matthew 11:15**

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### **Written by Amanda Billups**

I've had a hard time seeing God lately. If I'm being honest, I'd mostly stopped looking. Thanks to confirmation bias, my subconscious belief that God hasn't been showing up meant my brain had stopped looking for evidence of his presence. In one of my favorite movies, *August Rush*, an orphaned musical prodigy, hears music in the most ordinary of things - the rustling of grass; the whooshing of trains; or the dancing of wind chimes - conducting them in his head to make a beautiful symphony. The music fills his soul with hope that tomorrow will be different from today. The movie ends with this quote, "The music is all around us. All you have to do is listen." This line often comes to me when I need it most, reminding me to simply be more aware and present of my surroundings. Suddenly I see God surprising me through the "ordinary" - the love and sacrifice of the foster parents I work with; the dedication of my fellow social workers; a stranger's act of kindness or passing smile; the hug of a friend; a beautiful song, or acts of service from my husband. I think what is both most and least surprising is how God has been recapturing my attention through the extra beautiful vibrance of the fall leaves revealing his attention and love for detail and beauty. These are the everyday touchpoints that easily become lost in the daily hustle. Life is hard and things can be complicated. At the same time, I'm wondering if just maybe... the music of God's love is all around us. And sometimes all we have to do is be still and listen.

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*I want to hear your love all around me; I need to hear you, Jesus. Open up my ears.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 13th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

**Matthew 6:33**

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### **Written by Adam Winters**

I'm not the biggest beach fan. It might have something to do with the fact that I get sunburned very, very quickly. Like on my way from my house to my car... anyway, I was struck recently by a thought about how my faith is often like sand. If I pick it up and squeeze/hold too tightly, it slips through my fingers. But if I open my hand and scoop it out, it can stay in my hands without slipping out. The harder I try to hold onto particular ideas or theological "truths" the more I find that they slip through my fingers and there really isn't anything there. It's scary to think about how my faith has been that fragile in the past. However, if I hold it with an open hand, I still find that I have faith. I have found that it doesn't really matter *who* is in or out, or *what* the Bible says about such and such. What matters is that I try to pattern my way of living after Jesus. I don't have to be right about everything. I just have to love like God loved me.

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*Lord Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

**December 14th**

**Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and he will make straight your paths.*

**Proverbs 3:5**

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**Written by Lori Kellogg**

A few years ago, I decided to arrange my life in order to eliminate math.

And I had some remarkable success. I hired tutors to teach it to my children. I used automatic banking. I delegated any complicated calculations to someone much more qualified.

So, imagine my surprise earlier this year when my son purchased a business and asked (can I say begged??) me to be his office manager!

My skillful, life-long avoidance of numeracy was out the window!

The first 20 times he asked, I turned him down flat. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but having an office job just seemed like the least interesting idea I could think of!

And anyway, I had a ministry that was my occupation. I had always had an occupation that was also my ministry! I was a homeschool mom, then a tutor and teacher of special needs children, then I worked as a case manager for families experiencing homelessness.

In every one of these jobs, I worked very hard. I cared for the humans who were entrusted to me. I exhausted myself physically, emotionally, spiritually, and in any possible way. I thought I was "supposed" to work that hard. After all, if it was the Lord's work, how could it be anything but? Wasn't this how I was partnering with Jesus to bring about his will on earth as it is in Heaven? Isn't this how I prove my worthiness in the Kingdom of God?

The problem was, however, that I didn't have anything left. I couldn't volunteer or offer anything outside of what I had already given at work because I just didn't have it to give. That is when I began praying specifically for margin. I needed some space around the edges of my life to breathe.

Still, it felt like grief to step away and accept the office job. Like I was letting Jesus down somehow and that choosing to have an occupation that was not also a ministry was admitting failure.

The surprise is that I am happier now than I have been in a long time! My stress level is so much lower, my health is improved, and I have enough margin to experience curiosity and creativity in my walk with God (the first things to go when I'm stressed). I can now spend a lot of time with my family, make a living, and have energy at the end of my workday to do other things!

I learned that I don't have to prove my worthiness in the Kingdom of God; through Jesus I am already worthy.

I don't have to work hard to earn my enough-ness; through Jesus I am already enough.

I am free to be my own weird self taking up the unique space I have been given in my own life. What a welcome surprise!

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*Jesus, thank you for opening unexpected opportunities in my life that lead me toward fulfillment and purpose in you.*

***Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)***

## **December 15th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*For God did not send his son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

**John 3:17**

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### **Written by Alex Bryson**

So everyone knows John 3:16 "for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." That's one of the first verses many Christians learn, especially of you were raised in the church. I was always more affected by the verse after - John 3:17- and how it seemed few people could recite it by heart. "For God did not send his son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." It's a natural follow up to remind us that God could have turned his back on us the moment we used his gift of free will to defy his wish to not eat the fruit of the tree. Instead, through love and compassion, he sacrificed something so close to him to give us another chance through his unconditional love. To me, it's important to reflect on this, his purpose, as we come into the season of his birth.

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*God, you gave us your very self in an act of love rather than judgment in order to rescue us. Help us to receive this gift and live differently today because we know that your heart is for us.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 16th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.*

**Matthew 6:33-34 (MSG)**

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### **Written by Henry Neufeld**

When I think about God's ways often being unexpected I think about the Christmas story, particularly the story of Joseph and the surprise progression of his part in Jesus' birth and early childhood in Matthew 1:18-2:23.

We get the story in one short read-through, but he was surprised one step at a time over time:

- What? Oh no! Mary's pregnant! Well, I won't disgrace her, just "divorce" her quietly.
- What!? An angel? Mary is faithful and the baby is from God?
- What?! His name is to be Jesus!?
- What?! The baby, Jesus, is foretold in scripture?
- Who's here? Magi?! What!?! Worship?? Gifts?
- What? Danger? Flee to Egypt tonight?! You're kidding! This was all just beginning to settle down and make sense.
- What? Oh, ok, I get it – time to go back home, but oops, not Bethlehem but Nazareth.

If Joseph was anything like me, he couldn't have made sense of those events if they were laid out for him ahead of time; I'd never even remember their order. And I'm sure that he didn't just wait around for God's next instructions but got on with living, always listening for God's direction. In my view, it's better to plan and be ready to trust God that the details will work out along the way and may need to be changed. Rough times and harsh surprises are as much from God's hand as happy circumstances.

I have often been surprised at God's pre-prepared provision in my family's life events. Events surrounding births, getting jobs, finding housing, emergency hospital visits and many different happenings that were big or small at the time only later became evident as God-provided steps in an order that always showed that He knew what was coming and what was needed. It's never boring to look for what is coming next.

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*Help me trust that you are out in front of me in all the uncertain stretches of the journey, Lord. Thank you for your presence and provision.*

**Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 17th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. **10** Be devoted to one another in love.*

### **Romans 5:9-10**

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#### **Written by Melanie Winters**

A few years back, during an Advent teaching, Keith told us about the architecture of houses in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Sounds fascinating, right? Trust me, it totally was, and I continue to think about it every Christmas since. Our traditions and nativity scenes tell us that Jesus was born in a dirty stable, surrounded by gross animals, with no one around until the shepherds and wisemen showed up. That picture is counter-cultural enough, but the story that comes out when we dig into ancient customs and architecture is even more amazing. According to scholars, Mary and Joseph were actually welcomed into essentially the equivalent of a modern house's living room. (The animals were still in the house, and it certainly wasn't as comfy as my Ikea-furnished living room, so our traditions are half right...) Why does this matter? Because we have taken the community out of the birth of Jesus. Previously, I'd thought of Jesus being born in isolation, ready to take on the world all by Himself. But the truth is much different.

*Jesus was born in community.*

If God Himself thinks community is important enough to be born not in isolation but surrounded by others, who am I to think I should live in isolation? It's seems upside down to my introvert brain, but I've seen it time and again, the value of community, no matter how much I instinctively reject it. The dear friends who showered us with food and supplies when our whole family came down with Covid. The meal community who each week makes me laugh, buys me pizza, talks about Jesus with me, and challenges my assumptions. The people I've been able to walk alongside through hard times.

Time and again, I've been reminded that Jesus comes to bear in community. It's not of this world, it's different than my presumptions, and it's counter-cultural. But it's oh so fulfilling.

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*Thank you, Jesus, for showing me the significance of community. Give me a willingness to embrace community in which to grow as your disciple.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 18th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*There were shepherds camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep.*

**Luke 2:8**

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### **Written by Rob Seward      "Vigils"**

This has been an autumn of watchfulness for Cami and me, a time for vigils.

One morning in September, we found ourselves in Missouri, in a waiting room in a hospital, where our son and daughter were expecting to give birth to twins. After long hours of waiting, we heard a lullaby being played over the hospital loudspeaker. (Whenever a baby is born in that hospital, a lullaby is broadcast over the entire hospital.) And then we heard the lullaby played again because, twins! We began to receive texts with photos of our happy children with their babies. Our time of watchfulness, of wakefulness, this vigil, was over.

Two weeks later we were in another hospital 1,000 miles away, back here in Delaware, in a hospice room sitting with my mother. It was near the end of her circle of life, and another time of watchfulness, of vigil. When someone dies, we hope that they will not be alone, but with loved ones.

So, I have been thinking about vigils as this time of Advent begins. The word "vigil" is from the Latin word "vigilia" for wakefulness, watching. The King James Version of the Bible, the most poetic version, has Luke 2:8 translated this way:

"And there were in the same country  
shepherds abiding in the field, keeping  
watch over their flock by night."

As I write these words, I remember that my mothers' favorite hymn was "Abide with Me". And here are the shepherds, like us, abiding, wakeful, holding a vigil of sorts in the night, awaiting wonders they could not even imagine.

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*Jesus, make my times of waiting full of wakeful watching, certain that you are present with me and at work.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

**December 19th**

**Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

**John 14:27**

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**Written by Barbara Padilla**

I thought I had it all planned out.....where I would live, who I would be with, my finances, my life. It's easy to have faith when all is going according to (MY) plan. And then.....life happened and everything turned upside down. Failed relationships, deaths, pandemics.

How did I experience Jesus in a surprising way?

The surprise is...I'm at peace, true deep everlasting peace. Sometimes I have to remind myself that it is there, but it is always there. I still wish I knew what His future plans for me are and I continue to give Him suggestions (some pretty good ones, I think), but I am OK in trusting that His plan is to be with me through what HE has planned for me.

Thank you Lord!

I trust you Lord!

I love you Lord!

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*Jesus, there's so much we don't know, but the promise of your presence with us through it all changes everything. Thank you for your constancy and your love. Come, Lord Jesus.*

**Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 20th**

### ***Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)***

*Jesus wept.*

**John 11:35**

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### **Written by Bethany Miller**

The shortest verse in the Bible is also one of the most meaningful reminders to me of the nature and heart of God. Jesus actually wept. Tears welled up in eyes and rolled down his cheeks. And it happened more than once!

Although it isn't expressly written about, I bet little baby Jesus fussed when he was hungry or needing a diaper change. Child Jesus probably cried for a bit after he skinned his knees. These are human responses to pain and discomfort, and God chose to become human and make his home among us (John 1:14). "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being." (Philippians 2:6-7)

But Jesus' tears also help me understand God's heart for his children. Jesus didn't just feel physical pain in his human body, he felt emotional pain in his God-heart.

There are several specific accounts of Jesus' deep sorrow and tears throughout the gospels: after his dear friend dies (John 11), as he thinks about the people of Jerusalem misunderstanding the way to peace (Luke 19:41-44), and before his arrest and crucifixion (Matthew 26: 36-46)

Jesus feels deeply when people don't get it. When they misunderstand and misrepresent God.

So, when I think of the times that Jesus wept, I am reminded of God's deep love for us and the radical lengths he will go to in order to help people experience the true beauty of his kingdom.

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*Where I see a world of people who just don't get it, Jesus, give me a heart that is willing to break for them in their confusion and frustration.*

### ***Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)***

## **December 21st**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*

**1 John 3:1**

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### **Written by Kristi Meadows**

Since my sister Amy died, I had been struggling with the idea that God is a good father. My father would have taken Amy's cancer if he could, he would have saved her if he could, he would have given anything to ease her pain if he could.... In my eyes, God sat by idly and allowed it all to unfold. He is God but a loving father I could no longer see.

During worship one Sunday, I admitted that to Him. I immediately felt a wave of compassion come over me and a still small voice, saturated with sympathy and love, spoke to my heart: "Is that how you see it? Let me show you how I see it"

Then I saw this:

God is a father sitting inside his house (a.k.a. heaven) while we are all his children playing in the backyard (a.k.a. earth). Like any large gathering of children occasionally someone gets hurt. Depending on the severity of the injury and the personality of the child, sometimes our Father yells from the door, "You'll be ok, just get up and try again." Sometimes he needs to come out and give us a kiss or sit with us for a bit before we can get back up and sometimes... sometimes the hurt is too much and he needs to come out, cradle us in His arms and carry us back into the house.

He is a loving father, he didn't sit idly by, bordering on helplessness, and watch her die. He graciously and lovingly came to her, picked her up and carried her home.

It's not time for us to go inside yet but one day it will be.

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*When I don't immediately understand what you are doing, Father, remind me of your love.*

### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 22nd**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

Hear my prayer, Lord;

listen to my cry for mercy.

When I am in distress, I call to you,

because you answer me.

### **Psalm 86:6-7**

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### **Written by Jessica Sinarski**

Art moves me in ways I often can't put into words. It feels like the intermingling of the spiritual and physical world. I am quite logical and can get hung up on words, but music, artwork, and other forms of creativity let my soul get involved in ways that words alone cannot.

My need for art is especially strong at the peaks and valleys of life. In one of those moments (I can't remember if it was a peak or a valley), I pulled out some artwork by Melanie Weidner, painting supplies, and turned on Mumford and Sons radio.

Now the picture here hangs above my desk. And through it, Jesus invites me into the mystery of his birth and life and death, into blessing and the common experience of being wounded and yet finding joy.

Whether you are bursting with hope and joy or wading through a season of grief and heartbreak, I invite you to pray with me:

*And somehow, Jesus, you make blessing out of these wounds. Such joy. And this mystery.*

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### **Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**



**December 23rd**

**Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

*Be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.*

**Matthew 5:16**

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**Written by Bill Heider**

God's kingdom is ubiquitous. It's present everywhere, in manifold witness. I see it in nature, from the warmth of summer's sun on my face to the clarity of a star filled winter's night sky.

By far the most constant and clear expression on the kingdom of God in my midst is my wife, Kristen. This is most evident in her dealing with her son, Josh. Josh is autistic. This does not mean that he is anti-social. He is very social. He loves being with people. He asks everyone's names and frequently enters your personal space, even if it's uncomfortable to you. We have appreciated the patience with which the LifePath community has welcomed this awkwardness.

However, it does mean that Josh is unaware of typical social cues in common social discourse. He can be demanding. He can be loud. He can do things that leave you shaking your head. But it's not my goal here to discredit Josh. Josh can also be very loving and affectionate. But he can be tiring. Being Josh's mother isn't easy. In private moments Kristen will confess to me that she is having difficulty dealing with it all. But she presses on. She loves. She cares. She supports. She endures.

I see the kingdom of God in her.

I once told Kristen that she is like a sunset. Sunsets happen every night. Sometimes they are hidden by the clouds. Sometimes they are glorious, and everyone pays attention. Most often, in our rush to drive home or because of our obligations at work or at home, the gift of a beautiful sunset gets overlooked. I suspect that you know someone like this, who is as dependable and beautiful as the setting sun. They display the kingdom of God in quiet, relentlessly loving ways. Whether we pay attention or not.

Pay attention.

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*Jesus you taught us to see your face in so many places. Help me to notice where your kingdom is near, so that I don't miss anything you want to use to form me.*

**Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**

## **December 24th**

### **Silence and Stillness before God (2 minutes)**

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

**Matthew 1:22-23**

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### **Written by Ben Meeder**

"And so the Light became alive  
And manna became Man"

The incarnation fills me with hope. Jesus' life showed us the way to live that brings life, the radical way of life that spreads like a mustard plant. When love drives out hate, when peace defeats war, when selflessness is strength, vulnerability is growth, compassion is greater than profit, when heaven touches earth: these are the moments we see glimpses of the Kingdom here on earth.

In the times when the Bible was written, other religions had gods who stood above and apart from humanity. They didn't bother themselves with the affairs of people, or when they did, it was to use humans for their own gain. The gods lived in a temple, and only the priests and holy men could approach them. Our God, in contrast, became man to show us the way, the truth, the life. We were shown the way to live from God himself dwelling with us as Jesus. Now, the church is heaven on earth. We are the tabernacle, we are the temple. It is through us that God interacts with humanity. It is the Church who shows compassion for the brokenhearted, who clothes the poor, gives people a place to stay, who feeds, loves, never judges, is humble, studies the mysteries of God, teaches the truths of God's love. We tell the story of a people loved by God, called by God, sought out by God. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We walk with him, and he shows us the right path of life.

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*Remind me in every opportunity that you dwell in me by your spirit, Jesus, in order to love in a way that drives out hate, to act in peace that defeats war, to lay down my selfishness as an act of strength, to open myself to hurt in order to grow, to show compassion rather than profit at the expense of others, and to be your conduit as heaven touches earth.*

**Conclude with Stillness (2 minutes)**