

honest advent



Awakening
to the Wonder
of God-With-Us
Then, Here, and Now

25 Readings
for Advent
and Christmas

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Awakening to the Wonder
of God-With-Us
Then, Here, and Now

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Contents

Introduction

1. Annunciation

2. Light

3. Motherhood

4. Vulnerability

5. Given

6. Unease

7. Alpha

8. Breath

9. Omega

10. Virgin

11. Assumptions

12. Seen

13. Sacred

14. Counselor

15. Mighty

16. Father

17. Peace

18. With

19. Room

20. Goop

21. Breaking

22. Unexpected

23. Attention

24. Need

25. Fear

Afterword

Introduction

I. Love. Holidays. I'm always up for a celebration! And the crème de la crème for me is Christmas. It is by far my favorite time of year. But a few years ago, as the twinkly lights and evergreens came out, as they always do, I found myself increasingly ambivalent about the whole ordeal.

We had just finished an exhausting and divisive election. We were overwhelmed by the destruction in Syria. We had an unprecedented year of school shootings. Zika. Flint water crisis. Et cetera. And then came Christmas.

Lights! Catchy songs! Sweets! Cheer! Mistletoe (heyo)! If you live in North America, you're familiar with the candy cane striped juggernaut of seasonal branding that overlays every part of society like a fresh dusting of snow this time of year. Almost every aspect of Western society is decorated with holiday cheer.

But no matter how many potential kisses lay before me under the mistletoe, none of it resonated. I love Christmas. I really do. It *is* my favorite time of the year. But how we celebrate it just seemed meaningless in the face of real life.

My wife, Holly, and I have been married since 2005, and because of this partnership, I've witnessed multiple pregnancies and births up close—the third one (and last!) being very recent. As we started into the Advent season, I found myself moving away from the decades of nostalgia and visual branding that I had always associated with Christmas-time, and I began to meditate on this sacred story -

a story about pregnancy, family, incarnation, birth, God with us - through what I had witnessed firsthand as a husband, a father, a birthing partner, a human being.

Also, as an artist, I knew I needed some kind of new visual vocabulary to help me along in my journey. It seemed to me the brand of Christmas had traded its honest edge with sanitized characters in a never-ending winter scene. So I began to create an alternative symbol set for this story that differed from what I had seen in contemporary culture. I needed something honest. Something real. Something with some human grit and a little less green and red in it.

If you're not familiar with the terminology, the season of Advent is the period of four Sundays and weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas Day. *Advent* means "coming" in Latin, and these weeks are meant to prepare our hearts, minds, and souls for the arrival of God-with-Us, Jesus Christ, born to the virgin Mary a couple of millennia ago. You're supposed to feel the wait - the anticipated arrival of something you want so badly - and by feeling the wait deeply, you'll be even more satisfied by the celebration of the arrival on Christmas Day. At least that's the hope.

Let me give you a couple of personal definitions when talking about spirituality and religion. *Spirituality* is making what is invisible visible; *religion* is the rituals, rhythms, and practices we form to connect to that visibility.

We make up songs, sermons, little performance art pieces, to help us put shape and physical presence to a happening we find ourselves historically distanced from.

Nativity scenes are a way we visually remind ourselves of this ancient story in our present-day homes or front lawns.

Lighting the Advent candles is a way we perceive that the Light of the World has come into our midst.

Songs like “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” are catchy theological tunes that give us a chance to sing together corporately, but they also surprisingly become musical vehicles to approach the Divine with the deepest longings of our hearts.

That’s what is maybe surprising about all of this to me - we don’t celebrate Christmas like a memorial service but like a birthday party. Of course it’s Jesus’ birthday, as any child in a Christmas pageant play will tell you, but where is Jesus? When you go to a birthday party, you expect the person whose birth you are celebrating to be there, right? First, because you love them and are rejoicing because of their presence in the world, and second, because it justifies all that cake consumption. The deepest longing of our hearts is not just cake, but to rejoice in the presence of Jesus in our midst today. So where is He?

I’ve coauthored a couple of books on prayer with my friend Justin McRoberts, who has a delightful way of framing our frustration with prayer by stating that we can often confuse the mechanics of prayer with the essence of prayer. We can get all caught up with our language and body positioning and forget that these are just the invented structures that help us connect to what prayer is really about—abiding in the love of God.

This is true about all our sacred liturgies and services as well - they are just the visible mechanics that help us get to the invisible essence of the love of God. Often we can become too obsessed with the mechanics, substituting them for the essence, which is completely understandable. It's comforting to be able to hold on to something tangible versus the unseen wild goose of the holy mystery. This is how some faith communities become so obsessed with the style of music, certain ceremonial practices, or just anything that has a lot of nostalgia in it. Nostalgia is the familiar feeling rooted in a patterned experience that gives comfort in the face of present mystery. It's probably the largest influencer of church services today. It's easy to trade nostalgia for essence. Mind you, there's nothing wrong with the familiarity found in nostalgia. Familiarity is a helpful tool. But familiarity kills wonder.

Human beings are narrative-making machines. Our five senses are taking in way more information than we can ever possibly know or imagine, and our brains are synthesizing all of this information into simple narratives - narratives like, "This is a safe road I've driven down before"; "This is my friend David whom I went to college with"; "I'm all alone in the universe." They can have quite a range of meanings, but they're part of our biological makeup for surviving in the world.

Wonder is an interesting phenomenon, because it's that moment when all of our narratives and stories about life disappear in the rapturous experience of actually being here. Actually being alive. Being present with the glorious now. Like when you can get really close to some street musicians

playing a song. Or when you pet a horse. Or when you see a solar eclipse.

Wonder is most accessible in new situations, because we don't have a narrative about what's happening. Have you ever traveled overseas? You may know the experience of getting off the train in a city you've never visited before, overwhelmed by the beautiful architecture and sights and sounds all around you, and thinking, This is the most beautiful city I've ever seen! Then three days later you say, "I'm so bored," as you board the train to go to the next city. What happened? Did the city change? No, you did. You got familiar with everything, and the wonder went away.

What happens when we substitute the mechanics for the essence is that the wonder can go away. I'm not saying we have to start over every time to keep things interesting. It's helpful to find familiar rituals and practices that keep us grounded. But maybe what's happened to our celebration of Christmas is we've gotten so familiar with certain seasonal mechanics that we've begun to lose the wonder of its essence.

Where is Jesus? If you've read the scriptural account, you know that after His death on a cross and His burial, He resurrects out of the grave three days later (Easter!). He appears for a while in some mysterious ways to a handful of people. Then, on a mountaintop with His friends, He gives them a final commission and lifts into the clouds and ascends to heaven. So . . . I guess He's in heaven - and I'm not going to pretend I fully understand what that means. Heaven is the description of the larger spiritual reality where God and other spiritual beings are, but I don't know how to point it out on a

map. Is it in the sky? Is it behind Jupiter? Is it in another dimension?

If you ask a child in Sunday school where Jesus is, they will point to their heart - and that's actually not a bad place to point. Not that He's put His bed in your aortic valve, but in some mysterious way the center of our being has always been the doorway to connecting with God. Jesus once said to His disciples that it would be better for us if He left because He would give us the Spirit that will always connect us with the Divine Maker of all things. Connection with the Divine has evolved over time from a burning bush, a tent, a temple, a first-century Jewish carpenter, and now the mysterious hidden portal within you. But was it the fireproof leaves of the bush or the fabric of the tent or the stone of the temple that connected you with God? Or was it just the mechanics that helped you get to the essence?

Where is Jesus now on His birthday? I honestly want to know. This was actually the scariest question to me a few years ago as I was examining the Christmas celebration I grew up with. I was afraid that all I would find was a love for the mechanics but no real experience with the essence of Jesus. I wanted to have an honest Advent. One that actually prepared me for the coming of the Hope of the World - because I, and I believe we, need that hope more than ever.

This book is an exploration of finding the God-with-Us coming into our midst now. What I believe is that the essence of the Birthday Boy is hiding out in the mechanics of this life - the one you're living presently. That, yes, we can look to candles, songs, and pageantry to help us connect to the Divine,

but we can also look to pregnancy, biology, history, and mystery as sacred meeting places with the incarnational Christ.

Back when I started making these illustrations, I began to share these images and meditations on Instagram and Facebook and had an overwhelming response - specifically from women. It doesn't take much research to see that the majority of our Christmas imagery has been created by men, and I don't think it's too much to project that those men felt that the reality of birth must be sanitized in our cultural celebration of Christmas. I mean, I get it. A birth is a roller-coaster ride of biological wonder that is not for the faint of heart. But I do think this sanitization has added another painful layer to the experience that women can have in Western religion, and we need to address it and push against it. Female biology has been stigmatized by mainstream religion for too long as an avenue for wayward lusts, a means of bloody uncleanness, or a subservient incarnation to those who don't have a uterus. And yet right there in the text is the celebration of a woman's biology as the means in which the Divine incepted, grew, and emerged into this world. It loves so much.

If you've ever witnessed a birth, you know that every birth is a holy experience.

With that said, this is not a book about the extremes of birthing and illustrations to put the edginess back into the Christmas story. It's a celebration of divine participation through the body of a woman, and it has been with great humility and reverence that I created imagery depicting the female body in moments of pregnant journeying.

I cannot fully understand what it's like to be in a body that is growing a baby. I asked my wife all the time what it felt like to have someone kicking around in there, but no words can ever fully translate the embodied experience. All I can offer is my witness to such wonderful happenings and my artistic interpretations of those experiences.

This book offers twenty-five word-and-image meditations. They do not have to be read through chronologically, but I have put them in an order that works if you take that approach. We are often used to words as a way to connect with ideas, but I think it's important to offer imagery as well. My suggestion is to spend a minute with each image. Let it excavate you. A great question when it comes to art is, "What does this mean?" An even better question is, "What is this pulling out of me?" Art has that glorious excavating quality, so don't miss out.

Let me also note that I play with spiritual language in this book. When we talk about Jesus, we talk about a man, so I naturally refer to him as Him. But with God or the Spirit, I may use a nongendering reference such as It or They. I do this on purpose to pull us into the greater mystery of the Divine that demands us to evaluate how we speak of It and remove us from assumptions of divine gender. It also is to remove any unnecessary barriers that could get in the way of readers who are trying to find themselves in this story that is for everyone. It is not a diminishing choice, but rather an enlarging invitation I offer to you.

My hope is this book awakens the wonder of God-with-Us in you by contemplating how it happened back then, and also here and actually right now. I hope it can be a visual and lyrical

companion as we enter into this season of anticipation -
waiting for the coming Hope we deeply long for. And may it be
the tasty cake at the birthday party that is still happening today,
just as it did two thousand years ago.

Chapter 1: Annunciation

Gabriel appeared to her and said,

“Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!”

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.

Luke 1:28–29 NLT



I presume most of us would invite a divine annunciation. To have some otherworldly being deliver a message from the Almighty sounds like everything we've been hoping for. How often do we anguish over life decisions and direction, and how incredible would it be to receive a definitive answer from the Lord of Lords!

It would be the story you would tell over and over again - how you were sitting in the drive-through line for your iced americano (with cream and two pumps of classic syrup) and suddenly a divine voice spoke clear as day, as if through the very drive-through speaker, and laid out the glorious plan for your life. Or one night you had a fantastically vivid dream, and when you awoke, you knew with certainty what the next steps were. Or how you tumbled out of a wrecked car on the side of the interstate, lifted by the arms of a stranger who appeared out of nowhere, who told you it was time to do that thing you've been afraid of and have been putting off for years. You turned to look at the oncoming fire trucks, and when you turned back to the stranger, he was gone! Oh, it was an angel! Whaaaa!?! It would be the thing that people ask you to tell at every dinner party.

It would be awesome to have this kind of story in your life. But if I'm honest, I'm actually afraid of revelation. All great stories come at a cost, and the cost of revelation is that it's going to ask something of us. In any divine annunciation, you receive revelation as a gift, yet at the same time you receive notice that all that you had planned is ending. It's all over.

Everything will change - most of all you.

And maybe that is a welcomed change. Maybe you are reading this thinking, God, I could use a change, and maybe you're ready for such a transformation.

But the rub of revelation is that it's a transformation you're not in charge of. We all have areas in which we would love transformation. For example, me - a never-ending daddy tummy, a proclivity to melancholy, an inability to enjoy the last few Star Wars films (sorry, JJ, I tried!).

Maybe for you, it's your relationship with your in-laws, your finances, your dead-end job with its annoying micromanaging boss, or your unceasing anxiety. But it seems that revelation doesn't transform the places you want to transform; it transforms all the things you dreamed and planned for your best-case scenario.

It's not so hard to see that Mary's transformation could look a lot like ours. How your life would be. Whom you'd marry. What your wedding would be like. Your first kid's name. How people would think about you and your family in the community where you live. How your kids' lives would turn out. Your best-laid plans.

Revelation is a hard gift to receive. You must give up everything else to receive it - like finding a treasure in a field and selling everything you have so you can get that treasure. But then again, she who is willing to accept the cost of revelation finds herself in the deepest of stories. Stories that are so mysterious, divine, and human that we still tell them today.

May you receive the light of divine annunciation in the flames
of your best-laid plans.

Chapter 2:

Light

The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.

The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness can never extinguish it.

John 1:4–5 NLT



The wondrously odd phenomenon of being a parent is witnessing the particular incarnation of each child. Same parents, but every kid comes out differently, and the peculiar paradox of parenting is forming the parts you know and the parts you don't know. You intentionally form in the child manners, responsibilities, social ethics, and good taste in music so they don't grow up to be complete turds in society. But then there is this mysterious aspect of parenting, which is to pay attention to how they have uniquely come into the world and help foster their predisposition to its fullest fruition in greater society.

People come into the world already made. Sure, we are a culmination of body parts - eyes, ears, noses - enabling sights and sounds and smells and all other sensory experience, but there is a deeper, unseen part of us too. We use words like soul and spirit to describe that untouchable part. It's this essence that's hard to put a finger on, although when you look deep into someone's eyes you can kind of see it.

This is the hidden part of the child you must pay attention to in parenting. And this is the same part in ourselves that we must bring to our Advent meditation.

The Franciscan friar Richard Rohr sums up his spiritual practices like this: "The physical world is the doorway to the spiritual world," and the spiritual world is much, much larger than this one. His tradition believes there is a much larger reality, a reality hidden from our senses, a reality where God is easily seen and known, and this larger reality is only accessible through this limited physical one.

There is no mountaintop you can take your friends to and say, “Look, here’s God,” while you point to a giant, floating, cross-legged, golden-bearded man who winks at you and says, “I knew you were coming.” That’s not the world we live in. There is no visible evidence of God that way here. But if you look through the Scriptures, you’ll find that physical evidence is not the evidence we are offered for faith to rely on.

One of the best examples is when Jesus is teaching His disciples and references the final judgment, where apparently these two realities - the seen and the unseen - become one. He says that some people gave Him food when He was hungry, and drink when He was thirsty - and a few other interactions as well. The people say they never saw Jesus hungry or thirsty. And He replies, “When you gave food to the least of these, you were giving it to me.” Kind of mysterious, right? But what Jesus is pointing to is that the action of loving and caring for others in need opens the portal to this larger reality, this heavenly way - a way in which we connect with God. It is through this physical world that we are invited to connect with the hidden reality of God.

I know, I know. We’re starting to get really mystical. We could start talking about heaven and earth and which one is our real home. And then I could throw a Meister Eckhart quote at you: “If the soul could have known God without the world, the world would never have been created,” and then I’ll lose some of you because that quote will cook your noodle as you ponder it for the rest of the day. So let’s gather back and go here together . . .

Who we are is deeper than where we find ourselves in this moment. And Jesus illuminates that deeper identity.

John writes that the Word (the Christ!) gave life to everything and everyone. And then this Word's life (Jesus) brought light to everyone. Another way to say it is there is a Giver of this life. And then the Giver of this life joins that life, and His life brings light to all life. Don't get lost in all the metaphor! Put simply, the function of light is to help us see more clearly. Jesus' life helps us see our own lives more clearly.

There are many ways this happens, but for one, His being human affirms our being human. It affirms that we are not supposed to be anywhere else but here. Now. In this life. In this world. From being born into it to disappearing from it. This is the life we are asked to live. You are supposed to be here. For another, He affirms that we, in some mysterious way, are an amalgamation of something seen and unseen. That we came from somewhere and we are going somewhere, just like He did. And this physical world is the doorway to that somewhere. And God is not only present to us there; God is right alongside us . . . here.

Our invitation to Advent starts here, now - and thank God, because being here now feels really complicated. And hard. And sad at times. With a lot of loss. Right? It hasn't been that long since we all lost a normal way of life. Some of us are still recovering what we lost.

But what gives me hope in this Advent season is the reminder that everything can be taken away except that hidden part of me. Whether I lose my savings, my house, my title, or

my very livelihood, what is un-takeable is the part of me that Jesus illuminates. The deeper self that was woven into this world but is anchored in a much larger world. In the gift of my life is a doorway to a much larger reality. And Jesus is the Light that shows me the way.

May you rest in the peace that the darkness can never extinguish the light that has been given you.

Chapter 3: M●otherhood

“In pain you will bring forth children.”

Genesis 3:16 NASB