bless the Advent We *Actually* Have

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

By Kate Bowler and The Everything Happens Project

Oh hello my friends,

Here we are at the precipice of Christmas. Sounds...*ominous*? Well, that's probably because our bodies instinctively remember the knot of nervous energy that propels us through it all. The busyness. The hustle. The last-minute-wrapping. The beauty of the first snowfall (or at least the cinematic version on the Hallmark Channel). The delight of Christmas lights (after they are hung, of course). The WOULD-YOU-STOP-ARGUING-WE'RE-SUPPOSED-TO-BE-MAKING-MEMORIES moments. There are so many de-sires and longings wrapped up in every parcel, every must-make recipe, and must-do tradition. We dream of creating a glistening Christmas for our families or friends that makes us tired even before we're finished imagining it.

But what if we could take all those ideals and see what's underneath, at the root of it all? It's our hopes for peace and joy and love for ourselves, our people, and for our world. And we say, *God, show us again how this goes. How do we bless the Christmas we actually have?*

Perhaps we can practice blessing our ***actual*** lives together this Advent.

WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is a season marked by expectancy and preparation, and, you might be surprised to learn, is the beginning of the Christian calendar. In the church, the year does not begin with "New Year, New Me," but with the hopeful anticipation of the birth of a little baby who will come to make all things new. Advent lasts between 20 to 28 days (depending on the year), but it always ends on December 24th. Christmas is an entirely separate season that begins on December 25th and lasts until January 6th (Epiphany). The twelve days of Christmas (are certain songs making more sense now?) are set aside for a new kind of gentle joy in the arrival of the infant King.

Advent and Christmas are as different a s different could be. One is all eager anticipation and the other joyful fulfillment. Advent and Christmas even have different music to embody these distinctions. The music of Advent expresses a longing, a thirst - and the relief we will experience when it is

satisfied. Take this hymn, for example, written by Charles Wesley in 1744. It looks to Jesus not only as God's love expressed in human form at the incarnation, but to Jesus' return at the end of time, when death will be no more:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release
us, Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and
consolation, Hope of all the
earth Thou art; Dear desire of
every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

LISTEN ALONG

SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

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Advent music can embrace the hard things about life here in the not-yet, before Christ comes to restore all things—a reality we're probably all too familiar with. And one we want to walk through, together. We've created an Advent playlist for you to listen to as you practice the act of waiting with us this Advent season.

The entries that follow can be used beginning on the first day of Advent through Christmas Day, as we celebrate the great inversion—God coming to Earth in the form of a human baby—together. Seeing the world as it really is. Practicing hope for the coming King. Celebrating generosity and love any chance we get.

Come again with me as we draw near to all that is holy, all that is hard about Advent and Christmas. Because we can't do this alone. And shouldn't have to.

Bless you,

Kate

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- Like most things, Advent is better practiced together. We have created each Sunday's entry as an opportunity to practice Advent with others. This can be with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, a small group, or book club—in person or on Zoom. In that day's entry, you will be prompted to light an Advent candle. This can be an official Advent wreath you buy online (there are some cute ones on Etsy) or you can create your own. They usually include five candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white in the center), surrounded by some sort of greenery.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These are my favorite kinds of group projects. A huge thank you to our sponsors who make it possible to make resources free for you to use: The Duke Endowment and Lilly Endowment. And to my team who put this gorgeous guide together.

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For more free resources like this, go to katebowler.com/resources.

WEEK 1

Bless this *Hope-Filled* Advent

"It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope."

—POPE BENEDICT XVI

"The Lord is coming, always coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord."

—HENRI NOUWEN

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* http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist

DAY 1

Hope as Protest

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

—ISAIAH 40:30-31 (NIV)

Advent is a time marked by waiting. We wait for God to make all things right. For justice to be meted out. For world leaders to make the right decisions. For wrongs to be righted. For our communities to be safe spaces for the vulnerable. For our earth to heal. We wait for our lives to get easier—for us to have the financial security we need, for our relationships to be restored, for our bodies to ache less. We wait for our parents to understand us and our families to feel whole. We wait for our kids and grandkids to be healed or come back home. We wait for the grief to end.

But the waiting of Advent is one marked by *hope*. We wait with expectancy. With anticipation for the inbreak-ing of God to make all things new. And yet, hope can feel like a drug that must be carefully administered. Too much and we're setting ourselves up for disappointment or disillusionment. Too little and we're freighted with despair.

As we sit amidst our shattered dreams of what was not possible or what came undone, of what we have lost or of what was never healed, it is difficult to know what hope is supposed to look like...*now*. What are we hoping for exactly? How do we find real hope in the midst of all our disappointment? How do we stay awake to the kind of possibility Advent asks of us?

Especially when we no longer have the privilege of childish dreams of sugar plums and gumdrops. We have been awakened to the reality of pain and suffering. We no longer crave niceties or easy promises. We want the really real. We need true hope.

Of course, there will come a day when we don't need to hope. Like the psalmist describes, a future will come where we will "run and not grow weary, walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:30-31). The long arc of God's love will redeem and remake the whole world—and us in it.

Hope, then, is the function of struggle. It is the realiza-tion of our limitations or of our lack of agency or of the inability for us to save ourselves and the ones we love. This kind of hope is not a wishlist sent to Santa Claus. Advent hope is gritty. It shirks all false optimism. It is hope as protest. Hope in the face of impossibilities. As writer Barbara Brown Taylor said, "whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

As we wait—expectantly—for God to break into our world, into our communities, into our lives, may we have the eyes to see, soft hearts toward others, and open hands to what God has for us now. Trusting that something new is going to break forth amid this Advent darkness.

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER

For the first night of Advent, gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your parents or grandkids. Create your Advent wreath. You can purchase one online (there are some cute ones on Etsy) or make one yourself with items from around your house and yard or from the local craft store. They usually include five candles (3 purple, 1 pink, and 1 white in the center), surrounded by some sort of greenery. The greenery (be it real pine boughs or holly or plastic garland) represents life that is ever-green and growing. The Advent wreath began in 1839 in a shelter for orphans and neglected children. Each night of Advent, a German pastor named Johann Hinrich Wichern gathered the kids around him to light a candle, tell them a story, and pray. Imagine their excitement as the candle pushed back the darkness more and more, one night at a time. Any child called John or Joan would be first to help light a candle as they heard about John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus. Visitors who came to the orphanage loved the wheel-shaped chandelier and so the custom spread as churches and families adopted it, though the number of candles were eventually reduced to 4 for each Sunday of Advent, and 1 on Christmas Day.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Isaiah 40:30–31** aloud.

- Light the first purple candle and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 214) as a prayer:

"*Let not your heart be troubled;*

you believe in God, believe also in Me."

—JOHN 14:1, NKJV

God, these are darkening days,
with little hope in sight.
Help us in our fear and exhaustion.
Anchor us in hope.
Blessed are we with eyes open
to see the accumulated suffering of
danger,
sickness,
and loneliness,
the injustice of racial oppression,
the unimpeded greed and misuse
of power, violence, intimidation,
and use of dominance for its own sake,
the mockery of truth,
and disdain for weakness or
vulnerability—and worse, the seeming
powerlessness of anyone trying to stop
it.

Blessed are we who ask: Where are you, God?
And where are Your people
—the smart and sensible ones who fight for good
and have the power to make it stick?

Blessed are we who cry out:
Oh God, why does the bad always seem to win? When will good prevail?
We know you are good, but we see so little goodness.

God, show me your heart.
How you seek out the broken,
lift us on your shoulders,
and carry us home—
no matter how weak we've become.

God, seek us out, and find us,
we your tired people,
and lead us out to where hope lies
where your kingdom will come
and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Fill me with your courage.
Calm me with your love.
Fortify me with your hope.

P.S. Open your hands as you release your prayers. Then take hold of hope. As protest.

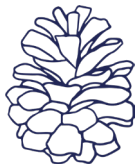
DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is your favorite part of getting ready for Christmas? How in the past have you practiced Advent?

2. Do you find it easy to hope or is hope hard to conjure? If you feel comfortable sharing, what has made hope hard to hold recently?

3. What does hope feel like for you? Has there been a time when hope has felt toxic? Have you ever realized you were hoping for the wrong things?

4. What is the difference between hope and optimism? Is there room to expand or redefine your understanding of hope?



WEEK 2

Bless this *Peace-Filled* Advent

LISTEN ALONG

SPOTIFY PLAYLIST*

"There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is itself the great venture and can never be safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to want to protect oneself. Peace means giving oneself completely to God's commandment."

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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* http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist

DAY 8

Peace Amid Chaos

I will hear what the LORD God speaks; he speaks of peace...Merciful love and faithfulness have met; justice and peace have kissed. Faithfulness shall spring from the earth, and justice look down from heaven.

—PSALM 85:8, 10-11 (RGP)

"Shh, the baby's sleeping!" says every new parent ever. But who can resist sneaking in on tip-toe to catch a glimpse of all that sleeping beauty. It's no wonder God chose to win our hearts by coming to us as an itty-bitty infant. God speaks to us through the coming of Jesus, and that word God speaks, is *peace*. "Peace on earth and good toward all," sang the angels at his birth (Luke 2:14, The Kate Bowler Version).

Yet, just as the peace of a snoozing baby is temporary, Christmas is precisely the time when peace can be in short supply too. There is so much expectation, so much longing and desire wrapped up into this celebration that it can be one of the most stress-filled times of the year. So much to do, and so little time. High pressure traditions that used to be fun or meaningful. Obligations that stretch us too thin. Disappointment that so-and-so didn't show up *again*. But somehow we still find the time for the annual Christmas fight. *Ah, some traditions nev-er die*. What we really need is a run-up to Advent—an Advent to our Advent—so we can get ready for getting ready.

Each Advent, there comes a point when I need to lock myself in the nearest bathroom. Take the deepest of breaths. Light a candle maybe. And find a way for peace to be possible even here and now in this chaotic, too-full moment. Carving out a place where wholeness and shalom can envelope me. Settle me. Where differences dissolve and justice is satisfied.

The Hebrew word for *justice* in Psalm 85 is often trans-lated "righteousness," being made right with others and before God in a natural, moral, or legal sense. Jesus is our righteousness and the place of new beginnings, a change of heart, of fresh forgiveness, and of new life that can spring up in the places that were once dried up and gone. *Does that sound nice right about now or what?*

In the meantime, we practice waiting by opening our-selves to the refreshment God can rain down on us, even now in our longing, in the midst of so much disarray and unsettledness. Maybe here, we can create more and more space for this by giving over our worries and anxieties to God, naming them to ourselves and per-

haps even to each other. We can breathe deeper when the heavy things we carry have been set down (or are at least shared with another). This is a form of peace—not only momentary relief from our struggles, but also the recognition that there are things we humans don't know, can't know, and that it's like this for us all. *Life is hard, but we don't have to go it alone.*

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER:

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime some of the kids in your life.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Psalm 85** aloud.

- Light two of the purple candles and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 220) as a prayer:

"*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*"

—LUKE 2:14 (NIV

Blessed are we, the fearful,
though we long to be people of peace. We can't lie:
we are afraid.

Afraid there won't be enough—
enough resources,
enough time,
enough memories.

Blessed are we who ask you for wisdom,
show us what to turn from,
what to set aside.

Come Lord, that we might
see you,
move with you,
keep pace with you.

Blessed are we who ask that this Advent
we might dwell together quietly in our homes. Come, Lord, that we might be for others
the peace they cannot find.

Blessed are we who look to you and say, *God, truly, we are troubled and afraid. Come govern our hearts and calm our fears.*

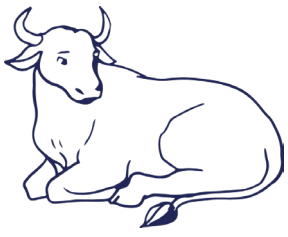
Oh Prince of Peace,
still our restless selves,
calm our anxious hearts,
quiet our busy minds.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is taking up your attention, stealing your peace, or causing you anxiety this Advent season?

2. Kate describes hiding away in the bathroom and lighting a candle when she feels overwhelmed or in need of a break. What habits or practices do you turn to when you need a break?

3. In Galatians 6:2, Paul encourages the church in Galatia to "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ" (NASB). What are you carrying? Can you share it with others now? Even if it isn't easily fixable, can you shoulder it together?



WEEK 3

Bless this *Joy-Filled* Advent

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

—FATHER PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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* http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist

DAY 15

Uninvited Joy

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

—LUKE 1:41-45 (NRSV)

I've borrowed categories from my friend Luke Breth-erton—who happens to also be a theologian (it's very helpful to know a few of those). Like what he calls "tragic time"—that experience of time when things come undone and whatever has happened is world-altering. Tragic time feels almost slippery. Like you cannot believe the world is still spinning because yours has stopped. And yet, somehow, experiences of joy can still catch you off guard.

Joy is sneaky in that way. It doesn't discriminate be-tween tragic time and ordinary time. It's not a joy we can "choose" because that would often mean ignoring the reality of our heartbreak or circumstances. It just happens. Somehow. Some way. Showing up uninvited even in the most unlikely of situations.

The Gospel of Luke introduces us to Elizabeth who became pregnant after many, many years of infer-tility, well into her old age. Her husband, Zechariah, even reacted in utter disbelief when the angel fore-told the birth of the child they had long-ago given up hope for. When Elizabeth was six months along, she was visited by her beloved cousin, Mary—who too had just learned of her own miraculous pregnancy. Elizabeth's unborn baby leapt with joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, rejoiced at the great gift Mary carried. Elizabeth was likely surprised by the visit of her cousin (it is not like she could text when she was on her way) and even more surprised by her showing up unmarried and pregnant. But those circumstances were not the cause of the joy that Elizabeth and her soon-to-be baby boy felt at her arrival. Their reaction was caused by the presence of God, of that new life that was growing in-side of Mary—despite the complicated situation that surrounded her pregnancy. Both women were expe-riencing the seemingly-impossible. They could have both responded in disbelief, in unhope, but instead were filled with the surprising presence of joy.

This story reminds us that joy is not the absence of fear, or disbelief, or uncertainty, or sorrow. In fact, joy exists despite all the reasons why it shouldn't.

In the week ahead, we will devote ourselves to learn-ing more about how to recognize the gift of joy found in the presence of God. Regardless of what is hap-pening in our lives, joy can and does break in. Joy is the sign and reminder that God is still working, still loving, still fulfilling God's promises. So let's put our-selves in the path of joy this week, shall we?

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER:

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your grandkids.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary in **Luke chapter 1** aloud. Pay attention to how many times **JOY** is mentioned.

- Light the three purple candles (but sometimes the joy candle is pink!) and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 218) as a prayer:

Blessed are we who wait with bated breath. who wait for something new to be born
—for new hope or new joy or new life.

Blessed are we
whose patience grows thinner by the day.
We who are tired of the world as it is
—in all of its heartache and loss and hopelessness. We who want more.
More hope. More joy. More life.

Blessed are we who sit here,
waiting
at the still point between desire and expectation. We who are making room for more of you,
oh God, this Christmas.

Surprise us with joy in the midst of the mundane, abundance in the midst of so much scarcity, presence in the midst of the Christmas chaos.

"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 (NIV)

We have quieted our souls to listen,
to wait for you, oh God,
for your Word-Made-Flesh is life to us.

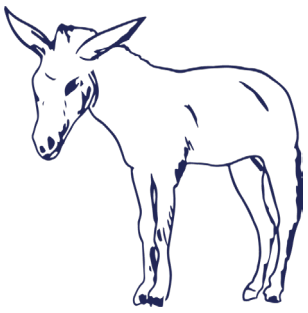
Amen.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. Talk about a time when you have felt filled with joy. What were you doing? What did it feel like? Is there any common thread between everyone's experiences of joy?

2. Have you ever been surprised by the presence of God or a moment of joy or abundance during a particular sea-son of tragic time?

3. How can you be a source of joy to others this week? Could you go caroling to your neighbors? Or could you call some other family members (like the ones we are usually too busy to call)? Could you visit someone in the hospital? Or send a card of love and joy in the mail?



WEEK 4

Bless this *Love-Filled* Advent

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home.

—*FROM THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS* BY G. K. CHESTERTON

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* http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist

An Architecture of Love

Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?...Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

—2 SAMUEL 7:5,11 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

—LUKE 1:26-27 (NRSV)

All of us are builders at heart. As kids we build forts from cardboard. We huddle under blankets thrown over tables. We revel in the discovery of what our hands can make with just Play-Doh or Lego. And so, when King David decided it was time to build God a house for worship (2 Samuel 7:5,11), God turns the tables. God promises that David and his descendants will build a house that would be a strong refuge forever, one built on the tiniest of frames. The child Je-sus, born in a stable of the house and lineage of David, would be the sign and the promise of a Kingdom where truth reigns, where hope is reborn.

Christmas Eve is the call to all of us who long to come home. To be where someone loves us best of all. Where we belong. And that is exactly what God has built for us. An architecture of love whose beauty is deep enough, immense enough for all of us to crawl into with all of our needs and our confusion, our longings and our fears. Big enough to encompass the whole world. Because God's house of love has come to reconfigure our reality. Though we can't see the whole of it, in coming to earth God is showing us what love is, and the truth that God will not abandon us, nor this good earth. For look! There in the animal's feeding trough lies a baby king with healing in his wings.

PRACTICING ADVENT TOGETHER:

Gather your family together over dinner, invite over some friends, or FaceTime your grandkids.

- Here is a chance to share Advent at your Christmas Eve gathering. Whatever you are doing today or wherever you find yourself, invite those around you to join in with the reading and lightning of the Advent candle.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Luke 2:1–7** aloud.

- Light all four purple candles and read this blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 222) as a prayer:

"Are you the one who is to come,
or shall we look for another?"
—Matthew 11:3, ESV

God, we are waiting for love,
not the simple kind
or the sweep-you-off-your-feet
kind,
but the absurd kind.

The kind wrapped in rags,
resting in a bucket of animal feed.
Love enough to save us all.

Blessed are we who look for Love
deeper, fuller, truer—than we have
ever known,
than we could have ever hoped for.

Blessed are we who seek you,
the light that dawned so long ago
in that dark stable.
Love given.
Love received.

Receive this gift, dear one.
Love has come for you.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What is your favorite Christmas carol? What does it say to you about the meaning of Christ-mas?

2. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." This is a line from the Christ-mas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." How does Christmas Eve awaken hopes? Fears?

3. Amid all the expectations of Christmas, think of yourself as a little kid on Christmas Eve. What hope might your heart stretch to embrace this Christmas? Ask Jesus to meet you there.

4. Read G.K. Chesterton's gorgeous poem, "The House of Christmas." Notice how tender and precarious the house of Christmas is.[2]

1 https://hymnary.org/text/o_little_town_of_bethlehem

2 https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/the-house-of-christmas-gk-chesterton/

Bless this *Christmas*

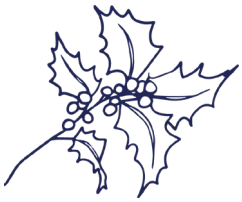
LISTEN ALONG

SPOTIFY PLAYLIST *

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!

O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him;
O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

—*O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL*, TRANS. FREDERICK OAKELEY (1841)



* http://q-r.to/christmas-spotify-playlist

CHRISTMASTIDE DAY 1

God With Us

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

—JOHN 1:1-5 (NRSVUE)

In this community, we talk a lot about before and af-ters. There is a life *before*. In the Before Times, jokes might have come easily and you might be quick to laugh. A time when it felt easy to make plans far off in the future and hope was easy to come by.

And there is a life *after*. Which might be what you are experiencing today.

The first Christmas since the divorce or after the kids started their own family traditions. The first Christ-mas with one less stocking to fill, or perhaps realizing the perfect gift didn't actually fix the broken relation-ship. Your house may be lacking the joy (or people) you had hoped for. Maybe today you woke up and de-cided to go back to sleep because living in the *after* is hard work (we understand and we are so sorry). No matter what you are experiencing, today, we also rec-ognize a different before and after.

Advent is a season of divine anticipation. A *before* marked by waiting with bated breath for Jesus to be born, for the world to be made right. And Christmas is the ultimate *after*. One marked by realized joy and celebration. As we finally place baby Jesus in our nativity scenes and light the Christ candle on our Ad-vent wreaths, we are reminded that Jesus' birth means that God is with us, the Emmanuel.

God is with us in our before and afters. *God is with us* in our pain and joy. *God is with us* during our beginnings and endings. *God is with us* when we find the courage to hope for a bigger story even in our own impossible situations. *God is with us* when we are surprised by the joy that embraces our sorrow and loss. *God is with us* when we feel a peace that passes all understanding, even when our lives have come undone. *God is with us* even when our circumstances don't change. *God is with us* when we realize God's love for us, so much that God sent Jesus to us.
The best news is that the love, peace, joy, and hope that comes with God's presence doesn't have to end when the clock strikes midnight tonight. It can't be boxed up and put in storage until next year. We can practice recognizing, embracing, and looking for the presence of God throughout the year. For our God is always with us from this day until the end.

This is the day we've been waiting for. Let us rejoice.

PRACTICING CHRISTMAS TOGETHER

- Gather your family together maybe before opening presents, or use your Advent wreath as the centerpiece on your Christmas dinner table. If you are alone this Christmas, find someone to FaceTime or take this peaceful moment to feel God's presence.

- Turn down the lights, gather around the Advent wreath, and read **Luke 2:8-20** aloud.

- Light all the candles around the wreath, saving the Christ candle (the white candle in the center) for last and read this blessing below, from *The Lives We Actually Have* (p. 224) as a prayer:

God, this is a kind of magic
the way this day shines so strangely,
how it sparkles beyond our understanding.

(Yes, it was a disaster
the way the food turned out this year
and how what's-her-face said (I told her not to) What shouldn't be repeated.
Again this year.)

But, somehow, this day
never fails to awaken a longing
to love well—or at least better—
all those here with us, and those far away,
and to remember with gratitude
those now gone, gone, gone and missed.

What is this mystery?

Our God who set the world spinning
should come down for this one reason:
to love us into a newness.
Not for gain, nor our capitalist fantasies,
but the hope that freely, lavishly,
that we might learn to see, feel, and live Christ's love.
Thank you.
Christ the Giver and the Gift.

DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOGETHER:

1. What have you discovered about recognizing the presence of God in your life? Share a time where you've experienced the hope, peace, love, or joy of God this season of Christmas (it can be big or small).

2. What are the gifts (hope, peace, love, joy) of Christmas that you want to cherish and carry with you throughout the year (not just on Christmas Day)?

3. How will you share these gifts with others? How can you be the presence of God in other people's lives by sharing hope, peace, love, and joy? By sharing these gifts we help others to live into the "after" of Christmas Day.

GOING DEEPER

- Today, be present to God in your life by looking for, embracing, and cherishing all the ways that God is surprising you with hope, peace, joy, and love. These are signs of God's presence in your life. List how you have felt the presence of God this day and throughout the season of Advent.

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1 Clip: https://youtu.be/ybR3TSRdVI8?si=Gn73nNNtM4aasdw_
Full Episode: https:// katebowler.com/podcasts/the-mystery-of-god