The God Who Draws Near

A GUIDE FOR ADVENT 2026



Variations on a Theme / The Four Evangelists by Grace Bomer

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CITY CHURCH SAN FRANCISCO



Advent begins in the dark and moves toward the light—but the season should not move too quickly or too glibly, lest we fail to acknowledge the depth of the darkness."
— Fleming Rutledge

How to Use this Guide

It's possible to feel lost at Christmastime. We can get swept up in the holiday gatherings, family obligations, and endless activity, only to find that once it's all over, we've moved through the season without making much room to be present to God.

Advent invites us to resist this flow. It is a season of waiting for God. To that end, our church community will practice slowing down together during Advent by returning to the Christmas story in Matthew's Gospel. Whether you use this guide on your own, at home, or with a Community Group, these materials are meant to offer tools for *attending to* God's presence in our lives.

Each week, you'll be guided through four simple movements: **RECENTER**, **READ**, **REFLECT**, and **RESPOND**. Take your time with each movement. Notice without judgment what stands out or raises questions. Linger with what connects with you or challenges you.

If you're using this guide with a group, the discussion questions can be a starting point for conversation. You don't need to answer every question. Make room for curiosity, wondering, and listening to one another.

The **RESPOND** section offers opportunities to participate in our church's Advent Campaign. Together, these invitations help us carry our reflections beyond the page and into deeper solidarity with our neighbors. You'll also be invited to practice the Examen, an ancient prayer practice that helps us pay attention to God's presence. We encourage you to return to this practice throughout the Advent season.

Move through this guide with *prayerful discernment.* Engage with what feels meaningful, and set aside what doesn't. And as much as you can, share this journey through Advent with others.

The Advent Examen:

Consolations & Desolations

Throughout Advent, we invite you to make the Examen part of your daily rhythm. The Examen is an ancient prayer practice from the Ignatian tradition. It helps us slow down, look back over our days, and notice how God is already at work in our lives.

Set aside just two minutes in the morning, midday, or evening to pause and reflect on the ways we feel connected to God and others, and the ways we experience disconnection. The rhythms of the Examen help us pay closer attention to what is unfolding in our lives and recognize God's presence in it. As we wait for Jesus, we trust that even in the dark, God is drawing near.

Find a quiet place, take a few breaths, and move through these five steps. Consistency matters more than length, so start small. Be kind to yourself. If you miss a day, simply begin again.

1. Become aware of God's presence.
Take a moment to become still and settle into your body. Remember that God is with you, even when God's presence is difficult to recognize.

2. Review your day or week with gratitude.
What are you thankful for? What moments, people, or experiences brought you life?

3. Pay attention to your emotions.

Ignatius uses two words to help us notice the movements of our hearts: Consolations and Desolations. **Consolations** describe experiences that draw us toward God and others. These moments may bring a deeper sense of gratitude, hope, connection, or aliveness. **Desolations** describe experiences that leave us feeling distant from God or others, drawing us toward isolation, fear, despair, or a diminished sense of life.

Consolations and Desolations should not be mistaken for mere highs and lows of our week. Something difficult or painful can still draw us more deeply toward God and others. And something pleasurable or enjoyable can ultimately leave us more disconnected or closed in on ourselves.

4. Choose one experience and pray from it.

Stay with one moment of consolation or desolation. What does this experience stir in you? What might it reveal about what you long for, what you need, or where you are finding life?

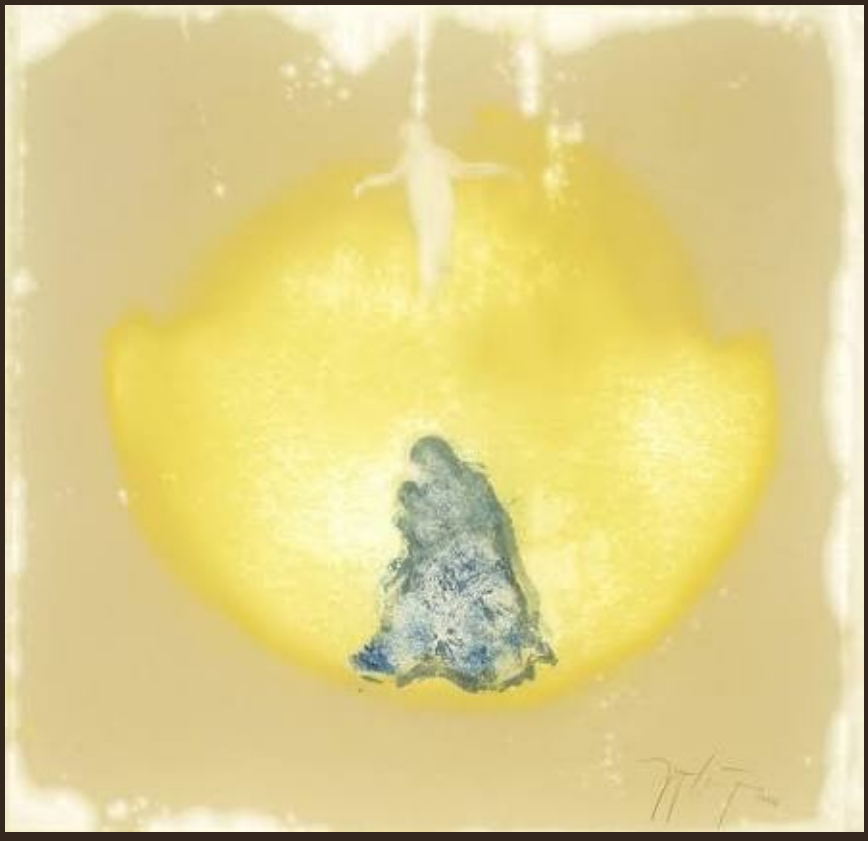
5. Look toward tomorrow.

As you look ahead, what do you want to carry with you? How might you remain attentive to God's presence and draw near to others?



The Risk of Hope

WEEK OF NOV. 29TH | ADVENT 1



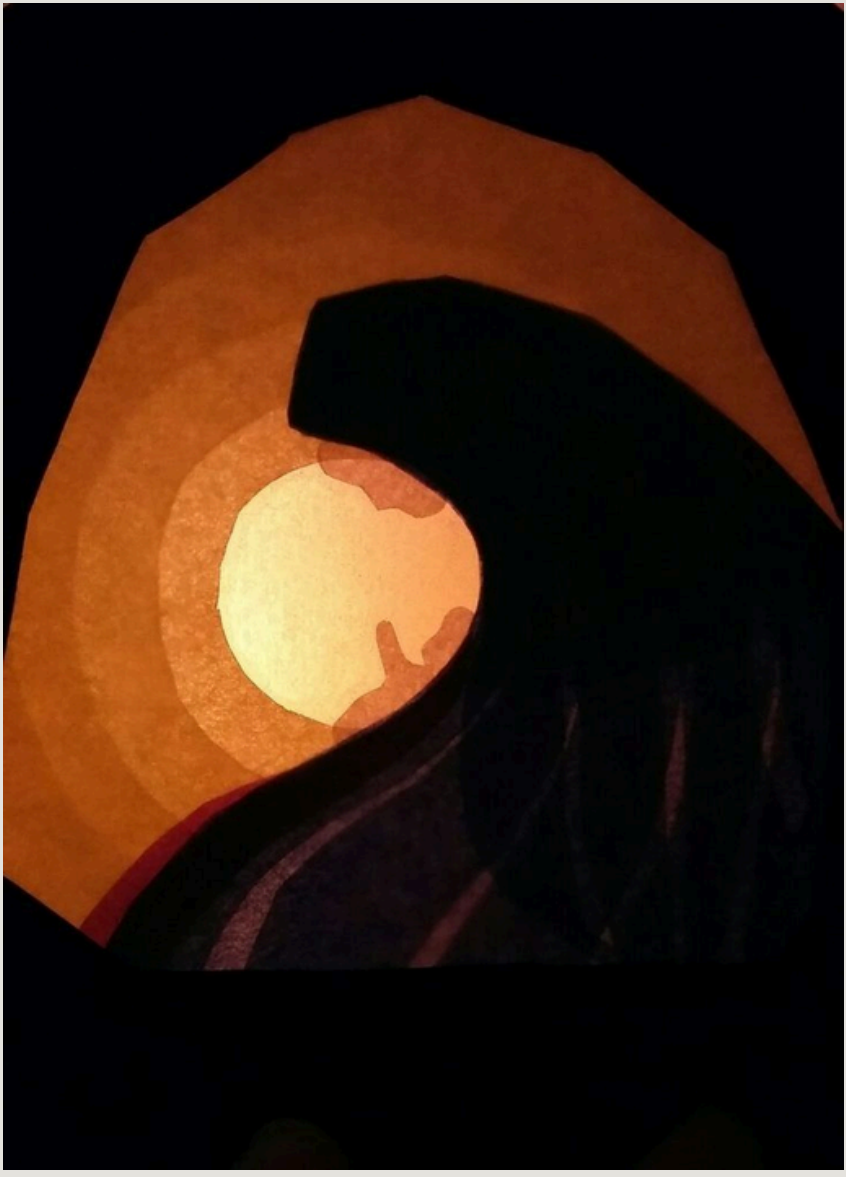
Chr. Geb. by Jörg Länger

"We must do without hope."
— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

"I never have been in despair about the world.
Enraged. I've been enraged about the world, but never despair.
I can't afford despair."
— James Baldwin

RECENTER

TAKE A FEW DEEP BREATHS AND SETTLE INTO THIS MOMENT. AS YOU BEGIN, CONSIDER: WHAT ARE YOU CARRYING INTO THIS SEASON OF ADVENT? TAKE A MOMENT TO HOLD THOSE THINGS BEFORE GOD.



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READ

MATTHEW 1:1-17 (CEB TRANSLATION)

1 A record of the ancestors of Jesus
Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:
2 Abraham was the father of Isaac.
Isaac was the father of Jacob.
Jacob was the father of Judah and his
brothers.
3 Judah was the father of Perez and
Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.
Perez was the father of Hezron.
Hezron was the father of Aram.
4 Aram was the father of Amminadab.
Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.
Nahshon was the father of Salmon.
5 Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose
mother was Rahab.
Boaz was the father of Obed, whose
mother was Ruth.
Obed was the father of Jesse.
6 Jesse was the father of David the
king. David was the father of Solomon,
whose mother had been the wife of
Uriah.
7 Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.
Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.
Abijah was the father of Asaph.
8 Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.
Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.
Joram was the father of Uzziah.
9 Uzziah was the father of Jotham.
Jotham was the father of Ahaz. Ahaz
was the father of Hezekiah.
10 Hezekiah was the father of
Manasseh. Manasseh was the father
of Amos. Amos was the father of
Josiah.
11 Josiah was the father of Jechoniah
and his brothers. This was at the time
of the exile to Babylon.
12 After the exile to Babylon:
Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel.
Shealtiel was the father of
Zerubbabel.
13 Zerubbabel was the father of
Abiud. Abiud was the father of
Eliakim. Eliakim was the father of Azor.
14 Azor was the father of Zadok.
Zadok was the father of Achim.
Achim was the father of Eliud
15 Eliud was the father of Eleazar.
Eleazar was the father of Matthan.
Matthan was the father of Jacob.
16 Jacob was the father of Joseph,
the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus
was born, who is called the Christ.
17 So there were fourteen
generations from Abraham to David,
fourteen generations from David to
the exile to Babylon, and fourteen
generations from the exile to Babylon
to the Christ.

REFLECT

THE RISK OF HOPE

Matthew's Gospel opens with what might seem like a tedious introduction: just a formal list of Jesus' ancestors whose names we can't pronounce, before we enter the violent and complicated world of Matthew's Christmas story. But it would be a mistake to move too quickly through these opening verses, without taking notice of something beautiful Matthew the author is doing.

A distinct feature of Matthew's genealogy is the inclusion of women. Matthew takes great care to include and name four women before Mary, the mother of Christ, whose stories could just as easily be left out altogether.

Who were these women?

Tamar, a woman denied justice by her own family. Rahab, a sex worker whose trust in the God of Israel led her to risk her life. Ruth, a foreigner who left her homeland and bound herself to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. And Bathsheba, a woman who suffered David's abuse of power, and who later used her voice to shape Israel's future. Their stories are complicated, marked by injustice, courage, and loss. And yet, Matthew weaves them into the story of Jesus.

Perhaps this is where we begin to understand hope. Hope is not pretending our stories are uncomplicated, or believing that everything will turn out alright. Rather, it is found in trusting that God is still at work, even in the parts of our stories that seem messy and broken.

It is under these circumstances that Jesus chooses to arrive—through this unlikely family and not around it—reminding us that God has always been a God who is near. Our stories, however unresolved, are not God-less or God-forsaken. In the birth of Jesus, God steps into our fragile human stories and draws us into a new drama, the story God's Spirit is still writing and telling today.

Discussion

- Jesus' family history includes scandal, displacement, and struggle. Why do you think Matthew begins the story of Jesus this way rather than presenting a more idealized family history?
- Matthew could have left Jesus' female relatives out of his genealogy, as Luke's Gospel does. What stands out to you about the women Matthew chooses to include and the stories they bring into Jesus' family history?
- Is there a part of your life or the world where it's difficult to hold on to hope? What might it look like to trust that God is still at work there?



RESPOND

Beatitude for the Despairing

God bless the despondent
who cannot muster a wish or a prayer
the ones who wouldn't dare think of dreaming
in such a time as this.
God bless the ones who hiss at any hint
of hope, bless the ones
using whatever they can to cope with it all.
God bless the fallen, the falling,
the "I've given all I have to give".
Bless the emptiness that remains,
the spaciousness of a poured out soul.

— Drew Jackson



Practice the Advent Examen

Take two minutes today to notice a moment of consolation or desolation. How did you experience connection or disconnection? Where might God be inviting you to notice hope?

For the full practice, see ***The Advent Examen: Consolations & Desolations.***

Participate in the Advent Campaign

Pastor Amanda and the Diaconate are leading this year's Advent Campaign, offering three ways to put hope into practice:

- Send books to people in prison through the Prisoners Literature Project.
- Help erase medical debt through Undue Medical Debt.
- Write a letter to the mayor in support of continued access to legal services through our work with the Exodus Coalition.

For more details about these opportunities and how to participate, visit ***the Advent Campaign guide.***

PEACE JOURNEYS FROM UNEXPECTED PLACES

Week of Dec. 6 | Advent 2

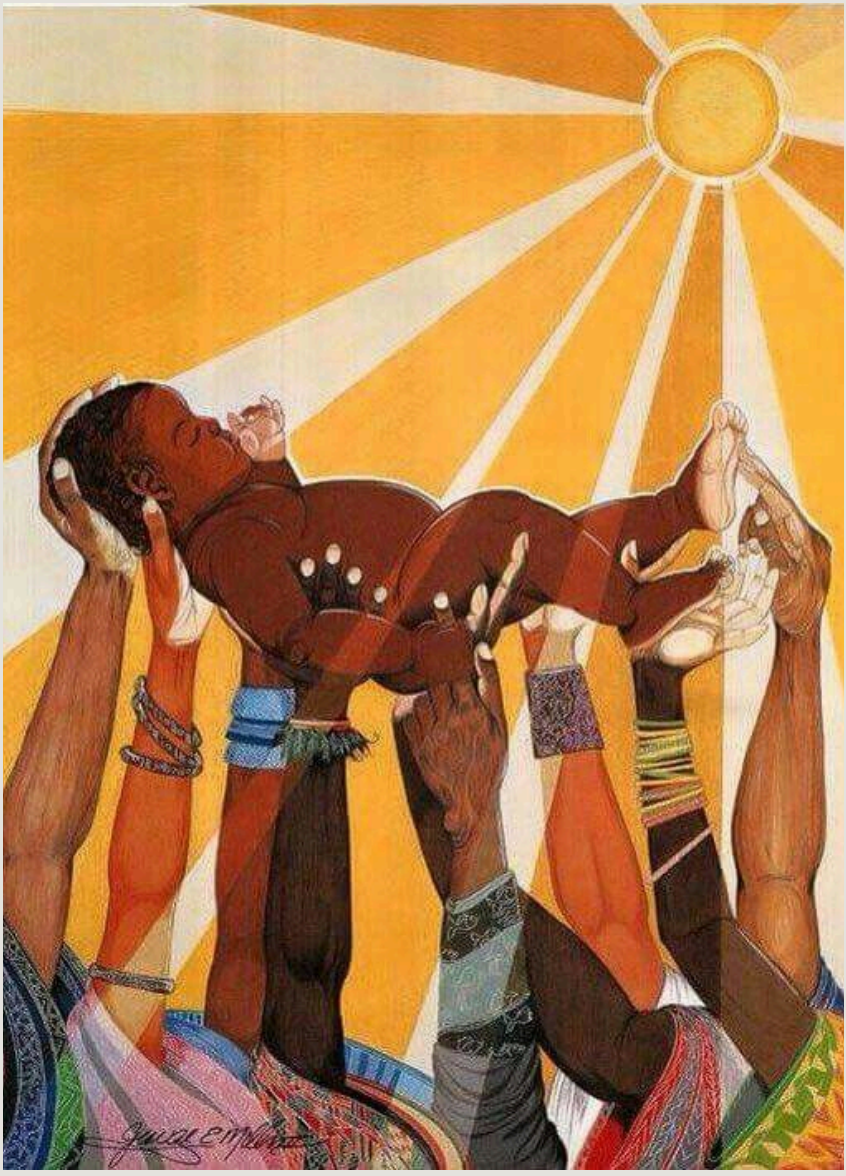
"*I* asked God for religious certainty, and God gave me relationships instead. I asked for solid ground, and God gave me human beings instead—strange, funny, compelling, complicated human beings—who keep puncturing my stereotypes, challenging my ideas, and upsetting my ideas about God, so that they are always under construction."
— Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy*



Three Travelers by Elena Markova

RECENTER

TAKE A FEW DEEP BREATHS AND SETTLE INTO THIS MOMENT. AS YOU BEGIN, CONSIDER: WHERE IN YOUR LIFE OR IN THE WORLD ARE YOU LONGING FOR PEACE? WHAT FEELS UNCERTAIN OR BEYOND YOUR CONTROL? TAKE A MOMENT TO HOLD THOSE THINGS BEFORE GOD.



READ

MATTHEW 2:1-12 (CEB TRANSLATION)

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. **2** They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

3 When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. **4** He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. **5** They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

6 *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,*
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” **9** When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. **11** They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.



REFLECT

PEACE JOURNEYS FROM UNEXPECTED PLACES

If you've walked by a nativity scene, you've probably seen the three wise men standing alongside shepherds gathered around baby Jesus. The wise men are such familiar figures in American Christmas lore that we often forget how enigmatic they are in Matthew's Gospel. We aren't told their names. They are known simply as the Magi. Nor are we told exactly where they're from (other than a vague reference to the East), or given much detail about who they are.

We do, however, know two things straightaway: First, the Magi are foreigners who have no obvious place in Israel's story. In fact, their introduction in Matthew's birth narrative would have seemed dubious at best to his original readers. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the Magi are the only characters in the story who actually seem interested in finding the Christ child without ulterior motives.

Consider the contrast between the Magi and King Herod. The announcement of the Messiah's birth elicits fear and suspicion from Herod, while the Magi seem captivated by wonder and mystery. Herod needs to be schooled by the religious establishment to learn where Christ is to be born. Meanwhile, the Magi seem farther along in their journey, recognizing that something sacred is taking place. While their knowledge is incomplete, they still seem more in tune with Divine movement than Herod is.

The Advent theme of peace might seem elusive in the story of the Magi. But if we look closer, it's still there. No, the story does not portray an idyllic world devoid of violence, let alone a silent night. Rather, this peace is reflected in the Magi themselves. The peace Matthew bears witness to is found in relationships. It is experienced through ordinary people.

Whether or not the Magi were historical figures, many of us know people like them in our own lives. They appear as strangers to our faith, yet at times seem more perceptive to the movement of God than we are. They may not fully understand who Jesus is or what he is up to, but they can still help us recognize his light. They are angels, unlikely messengers, whose message reminds us how close God actually is to us, even when we lack the vision to see for ourselves.

Discussion

- In the story, Herod responds to Jesus' birth with fear and suspicion, while the Magi respond with wonder. What do you notice about these different responses? What might Matthew be showing us about the nature of peace?
- The Magi come from outside Israel's story, yet become unexpected witnesses to God's work. What might their story teach us about the people and places through which God brings peace?
- Who is someone whose presence brings you peace? What do you appreciate about the way they are or how they relate to others?

RESPOND

Hammer is the Prayer

There is no consolation in the thought of God,
he said, slamming another nail

in another house another havoc had half–taken.
Grace is not consciousness, nor is it beyond.

To hell with remembrance, to hell with heaven,
hammer is the prayer of the poor and the dying.

And the wind in some lordless random comes to rest,
and all the disquieted dust within,

peace came to the hinterlands of our minds,
too remote to know, but peace nonetheless.

— Christian Wiman

Practice the Advent Examen

Take two minutes today to notice a moment of consolation or desolation. How did you experience connection or disconnection? Where might God be inviting you to notice peace?

For the full practice, see ***The Advent Examen: Consolations & Desolations.***

Participate in the Advent Campaign

Pastor Amanda and the Diaconate are leading this year's Advent Campaign, offering a concrete way we might practice peace as followers of Jesus:

- Call your representatives and ask them to stop funding war.

For more details about these opportunities and how to participate, visit ***the Advent Campaign guide****.*

Joy Refusing Despair

WEEK OF DEC. 13TH | ADVENT 3



Tent City Nativity *by Kelly Latimore*

"I cultivate joy as a discipline, attentive to finding it in life's everyday moments, determined to ride this thing until the wheels come off. In a death-dealing culture, joy is a form of resistance."
— Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes

"I've been thinking about the idea of queer joy so much, because any kind of advocacy…is rooted in righteous anger or grieving. It's actually so radical to express joy in the face of a world that writ large does not want you to have it."
— Julien Baker

RECENTER

TAKE A FEW DEEP BREATHS AND SETTLE INTO YOUR BODY. AS YOU BEGIN, CONSIDER WHAT IS KEEPING YOU FROM BEING PRESENT IN THIS MOMENT. IS THERE ANYTHING WEIGHING ON YOU, OR PULLING AT YOUR ATTENTION? SPEND A MOMENT IN SILENCE TO HOLD THOSE THINGS BEFORE GOD.



artist unknown

READ

MATTHEW 2:13-15 (CEB TRANSLATION)

13 When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him.” **14** Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. **15** He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.



REFLECT

JOY REFUSING DESPAIR

No sooner have the Magi departed than another threat looms large. Herod is intent on killing the Christ child, and the Holy Family must make its way on foot to Egypt, a land deeply associated with Israel's history of suffering and enslavement. The Holy Family fleeing for their lives is not the typical Christmas story we are used to hearing.

Could joy still find its way into a story like this?

When one comes face to face with senseless tragedy in our world, it is natural to ask: How could this be happening? Perhaps Joseph, the father of Jesus, wrestled with this question many times as he tried to protect his family under precarious circumstances. Yet, from what we know of Joseph, he did not allow his present circumstances to dictate his trust in God, even when the situation looked bleak (see Matthew 1:18–25).

Instead, Joseph listens to God. He steps out and moves in trust.

In an interview with late-night host Craig Ferguson, Cornel West was once asked how he manages not to let fear or despair have the final word. West responded that in moments of crisis, he draws on what he calls "ancestral appreciation": the loving memory of those who came before him and those who will come after. In those moments, their love keeps him moving forward. His response left Ferguson mystified. Wasn't that a little delusional? West pushed back:

No, not at all. As long as you keep moving with love, compassion, and [ancestral] memory, you are still persevering. And that's the best we can do!

Joy is not a commodity we possess. It is not a feeling that we have to conjure up in ourselves. Like so many of the themes of Advent, joy is something we do. It is an action we perform until it takes root in us. In this way, we can still know deep joy even when we experience profound suffering. This is a joy no earthly power can take from us, because it is sourced in the loving Presence that transcends the darkness we see in our world.

Discussion

- What stands out to you about Joseph's response to the danger facing his family? What does his story invite us to consider about trusting God through uncertainty and fear?
- Cornel West describes drawing on ancestral memory and love as a way of persevering through despair. What might Joseph and West teach us about the relationship between joy and perseverance when life is difficult?
- The reflection describes joy not as something we possess, but as something we practice. What do you think this means? How might joy look different from happiness?

RESPOND

For a joy that transcends by Cole Arthur Riley

Honest God, We don't want to fake it. We can't go on with forced smiles and feigned laughter when happiness seems so far from us. The weight of the world is so heavy, it feels as if we don't have any strength left to carry joy along with it. Be with us now as we try to reclaim and attune to some beauty in the world. Keep us from despair. Let joy be the arms that carry us from hopelessness. Not that we would have to manufacture our own happiness, but that a mysterious peace would comfort us, that joy itself would be the ground beneath our feet when we feel weary. Grant us emotional honesty on the journey, knowing you will never ask us to dismiss our pain; rather, you ensure that our pain doesn't consume us. Remind us that more than one thing can be true at once. That the world can be terrible and still dare to be beautiful. In the fight against oppression in all its forms, may joy protect us. Amen.

Practice the Advent Examen

Take two minutes today to notice a moment of consolation or desolation. How did you experience connection or disconnection? Where might God be inviting you to notice joy?

For the full practice, see ***The Advent Examen: Consolations & Desolations.***

Participate in the Advent Campaign

Pastor Amanda and the Diaconate are leading this year's Advent Campaign, offering two tangible ways to put joy into practice:

- Open up your home to City Churchers for the holidays.
- Donate goods to support queer youth.

For more details about these opportunities and how to participate, visit ***the Advent Campaign guide****.*

HOW LOVE DRAWS NEAR

Week of Dec. 20th | Advent 4



Refugees: The Holy Family by Kelly Latimore

"Only a suffering God can help."
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

"Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross."
— Shusaku Endo, *Silence*

RECENTER

TAKE A FEW DEEP BREATHS AND SETTLE INTO THIS MOMENT. AS YOU BEGIN, CONSIDER: WHERE ARE YOU LONGING TO EXPERIENCE CARE OR BELONGING? WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO RECEIVE GOD'S LOVE IN THIS MOMENT? TAKE A MOMENT TO HOLD THESE THOUGHTS BEFORE GOD.



READ

MATTHEW 2:16-23 (CEB TRANSLATION)

16 When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. **17** This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

18 *A voice was heard in Ramah,*
weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

19 After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. **20** "Get up," the angel said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead." **21** Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. **22** But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. **23** He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.



REFLECT

HOW LOVE DRAWS NEAR

So far, we've said nothing about Jesus in Matthew's story. He is, after all, a helpless infant whose existence and family are threatened by the genocidal whims of a paranoid king. If we take a closer look at the passage, the problem of a powerless Messiah comes into sharper focus. Jesus' arrival is accompanied by tears and escalating violence against the vulnerable. The loss of innocent life evokes an unsettling question: Why would God choose to show up in *this* way? Could there not have been another way?

These questions do not have satisfying answers. To try to resolve them would be inappropriate and maybe even cruel. Matthew seems intent on preserving this tension rather than sanitizing the drama for his readers. The author refuses to separate the coming of the Messiah from the suffering of the world with relentless honesty: *this is how Jesus the king was born*. We might further add: this is how Jesus *chose to be born*.

The circumstances of Jesus' arrival show us something about the love of God. God's love does not attempt to redeem human suffering for its own vainglory, but instead stands in solidarity with those who suffer. We know this because, in the helpless state of Jesus' infancy, God willingly subjects Godself to the same violence and vulnerability. None of this fully resolves the problem of suffering, but it might reveal how God's love is present in it.

As we move into this final week of Advent, we are invited to contemplate the mystery of this love—to emulate it, be transformed by it, and to orient our love toward those who weep.

Discussion

- What stands out to you about the violence and vulnerability in this part of the Christmas story? How does it shape the way you hear Matthew's account of Jesus' birth?

- What does it mean to you that God enters the world in the vulnerability of an infant, rather than arriving with the power to prevent suffering?

- Think of someone in your life or community who is carrying grief or hardship. How might you practice a love that draws near rather than looks away?

RESPOND

Why I Stay

Because You are not who I thought You were, so I must wait for revelation.
Because I need someone to wrestle, and You meet me at the river.
Because this is no ordinary hunger, and Your manna alone will suffice.
Because I will drown unless You part this water.
Because the world is dark, but it shimmers at its edges.

Because I'm wild inside, and You are not a tame lion.
Because You suffered, and only a suffering God can help.
Because my ache for You is the beating heart of my aliveness.

— Debie Thomas, Excerpts from *A Faith of Many Rooms*

Practice the Advent Examen

Take two minutes today to notice a moment of consolation or desolation. How did you experience connection or disconnection? Where might God be inviting you to notice love?

For the full practice, see ***The Advent Examen: Consolations & Desolations.***

Participate in the Advent Campaign

Pastor Amanda and the Diaconate are leading this year's Advent Campaign, offering two tangible ways to put love into practice:

- Donate to or volunteer with an organization working toward food and environmental justice.
- Pay the Shuumi Land Tax to the Sogorea Te' Land Trust.

For more details about these opportunities and how to participate, visit ***the Advent Campaign guide.***

