



bless the
Advent We
Actually Have

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

By Kate Bowler and The Everything Happens Project

Oh hello again my dears,

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 desires 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 as 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 ex-

presses 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:

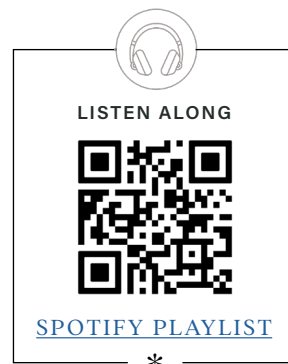
Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

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 (in 2023, that is Sunday, December 3rd) 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



WHAT YOU NEED TO GET STARTED:

- 20 minutes each day leading up to Christmas
- Save this PDF on your device or print it out so you can doodle in the margins. Or use the link to **Bless the Advent We Actually Have** course page which is a way to access this devotional on our website every day.
- [The Lives We Actually Have](#) book of blessings (optional)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- **THE LIVES WE ACTUALLY HAVE:** This reflection guide is designed to be used in conjunction with our book of blessings, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. Each day's entry encourages you to read a blessing from our new book. Of course, you can just use this free guide by itself, but you might find the most richness and depth when used together.
- **WHAT TO EXPECT:** We've designed each day to take around 20 minutes. That includes time to read the assigned scripture, a short devotional, a blessing from *The Lives We Actually Have*, and some reflection questions. If you have extra time, there are opportunities to dive deeper into our themes and topics by listening to suggested podcast episodes, participating in some hands-on activities, watching some bonus videos, and reflecting on the songs on our Advent playlist. Zero pressure to complete everything. Just pick the options that fit whatever day you're having.
- **GROUP OPTIONS:** 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.

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WEEK 1

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3
- SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

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

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

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 inbreaking 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 realization 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. 40) 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?



God With Us

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

—PSALM 139:7-10 (NIV)

I used to think that life was a series of choices. The college I picked. The person I chose to marry. The number of kids I wanted. The job I worked so hard to get. *Check. Check. Check.* I curated my own life until, one day, I couldn't. Until one day, tumors spread across my colon without my consent. Perhaps a death or disease or diagnosis or tragedy undid your well-made plans and took away your ability to choose the life you want, too. So often life happens *to* us. Without asking our permission (how dare it!).

When we discover we are living in the in-between of what is possible and what is not possible, we have recognized our limited agency. That small square footage where we can no longer assume EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE. Instead, we must ask, *What is possible today?* I

find that question far easier to wonder when I recognize there is no choice that escapes the promised presence of God.

During Advent, we are reminded that hope is found in an unexpected place—a tiny infant who came to face real life with us, to teach us how to live and how to hope, and, ultimately, to die for us. And he shall be called Immanuel, which means God With Us (Matthew 1:23). God with us on the beautiful days and the impossible ones. God with us as we celebrate and as we mourn. God with us as we make infinite choices or have very little choice at all. God with us when we have no other choice but to keep going. There is no place we can go that God has not already been—from the manger to the banquet table to the tomb, God is with us.

READ THIS BLESSING

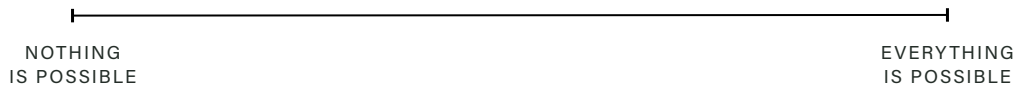
FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for the life you didn't choose (p. 188)

*Blessed are you in the tender place
of awe and dread,
wondering how to be whole
when dreams have disappeared
and part of you with them.*

REFLECT

1. How in-control of your life do you feel right now?



2. How do you experience God's presence? Do you find God in nature? In a feeling of peace? In words of comfort of hope? In the presence of a friend?
3. Do you find it easier to recognize the presence of God on good days or hard ones? Why do you think that is?

GOING DEEPER

- *Agency* describes the degree to which a person has the ability to make decisions about their life, to change it, control it, direct it. **Limited agency** is a more realistic way of understanding our limitations and what is possible. [Watch this video of Kate talking about limited agency](#) (7 min).¹
- When poet and pastor Jan Richardson's husband died, she continued to write counterintuitive blessings as a sign of stubborn hope in the face of grief and pain. [Listen to a conversation Kate and Jan had on Stubborn Hope](#) (4 min).² You can see how Jan recognized her limited agency by sometimes only living 15 minutes at a time during her times of deep grief.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDQcG77ZSX4>

2 https://youtu.be/_VfO-lkXG-g?si=e2Ur6VR4DS2pTZXD
Full episode: <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/jan-richardson-stubborn-hope/>



Teach Us to Pray

LORD, bear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.

—PSALM 143:1 (NIV)

When I pray, I tend to get pretty specific. Like my ten-year old writing his Christmas list, I know exactly what I want and when I want it. Maybe you do the same. We pray for loved ones to be cured. We pray for that baby we have always wanted. We pray for the money to send our kids to college. We pray for health so that we can actually enjoy our retirement. We pray for us to find our person who will be steady and get along with our friends. *You can see how quickly our prayers might become transactional:* “God, if this would happen, THEN I would be so grateful, my life would be complete, THEN I would be happy.” But what happens when our prayers aren’t answered the way we expected? When there is no cure. When the baby doesn’t come. When we don’t find our person. When our kid doesn’t want to go to college. When our spouse dies before retirement. When we expected a savior and we got a vulnerable infant. We had hoped for someday, but that someday is not today. Perhaps, it is in this exact place—a little scared, a little disappointed, a little hopeful—where we might learn something about prayer.

God is working to redeem not only your story, but the story of the whole world—both of which don’t happen on any timeline I would pick. One life, one person’s story is full of breaking and redeeming. We see this in the life of Jesus—there are times of miracle births; there is time of waiting in the wilderness. There are times of healing; there are times of mourning. There are times of crucifixion and times of resurrection. The breaking and healing of the world takes time. When we cry out to God just as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane—“God take this cup from me” (Luke 22:42)—our voice joins the chorus of the fellowship of the afflicted. And while quick solutions would be preferred, I take comfort in knowing I don’t cry out alone. And my cries do not fall on unlistening ears. So if today is not your day of wholeness or hope... let’s look around at others and see where God is working in their lives. Maybe see where we can make their loads a little lighter. Together, may we become people who look for signs of hope and act in hope while we wait.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for when you feel forgotten by God (p. 106)

God, please start it now: the promised healing, restoration, redemption. I can’t wait much longer.

REFLECT

1. What have you been expecting from God? What are your unanswered prayers... and how do they make you feel toward God?
2. What is your relationship like to prayer? Do you pray for specific things or for generalities? What do you think your way of praying says about your hopes?

GOING DEEPER

- Jesuit priest Father Jim Martin explores this topic with Kate in their conversation, “[What Good is Prayer](#)”? (37 min).¹ Listen for a rich dialogue about how we might learn to pray when we aren’t so sure about life or how God may answer.
- “Fellowship of the afflicted” is a term I borrow from Bible teacher Margaret Feinberg. Margaret realized that people who had experienced something difficult often understand things that they didn’t before. They earned their unwanted membership when their lives were turned upside down by pain, loss, or sickness. Their experiences enable them to walk alongside others who are also afflicted. It is this understanding that brings them together. Margaret and Kate are part of the fellowship of the afflicted and [share their stories here](#) (3 min).²
- The tradition of a Jesse Tree comes from the prophetic announcement of the coming of Jesus in Isaiah 11:1: “a shoot will come out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” Jesse was the father of King David, the line from which Jesus was born. The Jesse Tree is decorated with one ornament each day leading up to Christmas that tells the story of God’s faithfulness throughout the four thousand years of history before Jesus’ birth. Each ornament represents a specific story that we hear from the Hebrew Bible that tells us about who God is and how God works in the world.

[Learn more about the Jesse Tree](#),³ then make your own by drawing it yourself or printing out a guide. Reflect and pray over each day learning more about the characteristics of God.



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/father-james-martin-what-good-is-prayer>

2 https://youtu.be/6olowgPnBnY?si=oGn9LnHDXJro_aX6

3 <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/liturgical-year/advent/the-jesse-tree>

Compressed Hope

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, and go to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation. I will bring good to you. I will make your name great, so you will be honored.

—GENESIS 12:1-2 (NLV)

God took him outside and said, “Now look up into the heavens and add up the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then God said to him, “Your children and your children’s children will be as many as the stars.” Then Abram believed in the Lord, and that made him right with God.

—GENESIS 15:5-6 (NLV)

Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard. *For everyone.* That was one of my biggest realizations after I got sick. I needed so much help—financially, emotionally, physically—and I would not have made it through without the compassion of strangers and friends. Pain can make narcissists out of the best of us. It demands all of our time and attention and very quickly becomes the loudest voice in the room. How easy it is to forget. Forget there is someone turning on and off the stars. Forget that the sun rises and sets without us having to remind it to. Forget there is someone who makes each snowflake unique. Forget that there is one who provides the rain and knows when a single sparrow falls from the sky (Matthew 10:29). These tiny miracles can be reminders to us that God holds the world together, not us. It reminds us that God created the whole world, and we are dependent on God. And

thank God for that because we might be having trouble with regular problems instead: making doctors and insurance paperwork make sense, navigating complicated relationships with family around the holidays, and just remembering to take out the trash on the right day of the week.

Hope is found in knowing that even though it feels like the world is coming undone in my time and maybe in my life situation, the truth is that the sun keeps rising every day and the stars still shine at night. The whole world shines hope upon us everyday. We are just like Abraham in Genesis 12—called out of our comfortable worlds into a hope for a future we cannot yet see. We must trust God to show us the beauty and promises of the bigger story as we try to count the stars (Genesis 15).

READ THIS BLESSING**for waking up to life again (p. 52)**

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

Blessed are we who say, Wake me too, God. Put me where beauty and love can reach me. I'm ready for something new.

REFLECT

1. Abraham was busy living his own life and seeking his own future. And God interrupts, telling him to pack his boxes. God promised Abraham that there was a future for his descendants, that they would multiply just as the stars in the heavens (Genesis 26:4), an ever-living reminder of God's steady promise. What do you imagine went through Abraham's mind as he heard this outlandish promise from God?
2. What holds you back from embracing the beauty that God has for you—beauty that can live alongside your very-loud, very-real pain? Is it because you feel stuck or hopeless? Is it the fear of the unknown or fear of being disappointed? What keeps you from believing that God is taking care of the world (including you!)?
3. How might God be calling you to step out of the comfort (or pain) of your own world and to look around, so God can show you something beautiful?

GOING DEEPER

- Writer Margaret Renkl talks about how beauty might be exactly what we need, especially when we are exhausted. Listen to her conversation with Kate called "[The Art of Noticing](https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-noticing)."¹
- Start a collection of something beautiful. There was a time my friend was working on an island in the Caribbean, and she started collecting sunsets. Everyday she would chase down a great location to see the sunset over the ocean and take a picture (which is a lot easier to do when you live on an island). But what can you find in your world that is beautiful that you can take a picture of, or make a written list, or collect somehow? Can you count the stars? Find flowers growing in the cracks of cement? Be still and watch the snowflakes fall? How can your practice of collecting beauty be a reminder to you of God's presence and promises?



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/the-art-of-noticing>

Take Courage

So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the LORD!

—PSALM 31:24 (NLT)

As we prepare for Christmas morning, we might have the manger scene in our mind's eye. A star lights the way. Clay shepherds and wise men will arrive unharmed. Mary and Joseph will find a cozy place to stay. A baby will be born (skipping all the gory details). This lovely scene has become a beautiful nativity, but those who lived through the story know the real fear that was carried in every step and every decision. Mary was afraid of being stoned to death for being pregnant outside of marriage. Joseph turned over in his mind the fear of judgment and exile within a small community for his engagement to an already-pregnant Mary. The wise men knew the courage it would take to face a vindictive king and possible death from their long journey. The shepherds must have been worried about leaving their sheep unattended in the fields, losing their livelihood and perhaps not being able to feed their families. Mary certainly understood the anxiety of giving birth, with each growing contraction. Every step was full of fear, and yet there

was one small sliver of hope that this baby being born could possibly change the world. It was that hope that gave them the courage to keep moving forward.

Hope requires a whole lot of courage. If we were certain we could control the outcome, we wouldn't need to hope at all. Hope is not made out of certainty; it is made out of necessity. This is so often where the followers of Jesus get confused. You can be certain there is a God. You can be certain of God's presence. But you can't be certain about *everything*. Hope is what gives you a way to go on—even if you are not going to get relief from ordinary and extraordinary pain, even when your loved one has died, even if your partner does not come back, even if you don't get to see the culmination of your own dreams. People who are hopeful know all about fear. Hope is seeing reality and having the courage to keep going, to keep moving, to keep loving, and to keep hoping.

READ THIS BLESSING

*FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE*

for courage when you don't feel very brave (p. 104)

*Perhaps fear is not something to be vanquished,
But rather that strange friend who tell us
who we love, and what we can't live without.*

REFLECT

1. What are some of your biggest fears right now? How do those fears teach you something about what you love and cherish?
2. When we are most afraid, hope gives us the courage to keep moving. Where do you need a little courage today? How can you ask someone to walk this path with you by encouraging and having hope for you and with you, when you simply can't do it yourself?

GOING DEEPER

- How can you share hope today with someone you know or perhaps a stranger on the street? How can you walk with them on their journey, listening to their fears and showing them love? Can you write a note or text message to someone you know not giving false optimism but infusing them with courage?
- In a conversation between Kate and theologian Stanley Hauerwas ("[More Life, Fewer Explanations](#)"), Stanley says, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but it is the formation of rightly fearing what should be feared. If the courageous person didn't know fear they'd just be foolhardy. They wouldn't be courageous. So the courageous have fears that the coward will never know." [Watch this clip](#) (3.5 min)² to hear Stanley's understanding about the difference between happiness and hope and the courage it takes to hope.
- Take a minute to think about all the things that Mary and Joseph had to face as the parents of Jesus. Listen to "[Refugee King](#)"³ by Liz Vice also on our [Advent Spotify Playlist](#).



1 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/more-life-fewer-explanations-2>
 2 <https://youtu.be/hiHKnmnzJJI?si=IYzkvI2607U7ZrQK>
 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20g05Ijm0D8> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

Bad, Bad Math

When I determined to load up on wisdom and examine everything taking place on earth, I realized that if you keep your eyes open day and night without even blinking, you'll still never figure out the meaning of what God is doing on this earth. Search as hard as you like, you're not going to make sense of it. No matter how smart you are, you won't get to the bottom of it.

—ECCLESIASTES 8:16-17 (MSG, A PARAPHRASE)

Math was never my best subject. Combining numbers (and letters!) and telling me to find an answer never quite clicked. But maybe I've never been keen on *formulas*.

We spend so much of our lives trying to balance out some kind of equation for life. Like if we do all the “right” things, then life will finally add up. But then real life happens. We did all the things we were supposed to do and the addiction still has a grip, the doctor still has no answers, a relationship is still not what it should be. Even if you have tried everything—prayer, positive vibes, hard work—nothing seems to change. It just simply doesn't add up. There is no magic formula to get

what you deserve, and there is no equation that can predict what will happen next.

But God is not a mathematician either. Just look at grace—the forgiveness and compassion of grace has no equation that is fair or even. So too, God's love is incalculable. God isn't counting or keeping records of how good you are or what you have earned or what you deserve. Hope is found in God's infinite love and unquestionable grace. God sent God's only son to show us that there is no way to measure, or count, or add up the ways that God loves us. It is a formula we can never wrap our minds around. And thank God for that bad, bad math.

READ THIS BLESSING

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

for this beautiful limited day (p. 174)

*Blessed are we who see the impossibility of solving today.
It can't be done.*

REFLECT

1. What math problems are you trying to work out to make your life add up? Are you working hard to earn love? Are you wrestling to find the right formula to make you healthy or wealthy or whole? Are you trying to cram in more, more, more into a morning or a day or a life?
2. Think of a time when your attempts to solve a problem didn't work. Did you double down? Give up? Try a different way? What did you realize about yourself or God in that moment?
3. How can you accept the grace and love that God brings to the world, the kind that doesn't make sense and doesn't add-up? How can God's bad math bring you a glimmer of hope today?

GOING DEEPER

- We all need reminders that we can rest in the assurance of God's love. Sometimes we just need to hear it again. It is often good to hear things like: "There is nothing you can ever do to make God love you less" (Rob Bell), and "God already loves you completely." Listen to this song: "[Take it Easy](#)"¹ by The Porter's Gate (3:48 min), also on the [Advent Playlist](#).
- Listen to Kate reflect on what she has learned about hope in [this interview](#) with writer David Brooks in the face of her own fragility and faith. Kate wrestles with hope and courage, with certainty, with trying to make it all add-up (3 min)².
- Franciscan friar and ecumenical teacher Father Richard Rohr bears witness to the deep wisdom of Christian mysticism and tradition of action and contemplation. Father Rohr takes time to talk about God's "failures" in mathematics, and how we measure God's love and grace in all phases of life. Listen to "[Learning to Hold On, Learning to Let Go](#)" (39 min)³.



1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxPhR_6p6w4 | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>

2 <https://youtu.be/0vYIYPIX4h0?si=qI3bc7WCgAseiR5p>

3 <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/richard-rohr-learning-to-hold-on-learning-to-let-go>

The Best Medicine

Elimelech (Naomi's husband) died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband. One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home (Bethlehem)... After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!" She kissed them and they cried openly... Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

—RUTH 1:3-14 MSG, A PARAPHRASE

I always say that I don't have hobbies. *I have friends.* Who needs to learn to knit (I have terrible grip strength) when you can do something ridiculous with someone who loves you? Hope comes in many shapes and sizes, but hope, for me, often comes in the shape of my people. People who embody the very promises and presence of God. In the book of Ruth, we meet a woman whose life has come undone—she has lost her husband, her sons, her home, her security, and her future. Naomi has experienced profound grief—a change she marks by renaming herself *Mara*, meaning “bitter,” and declaring that her life and arms are empty (Ruth 1:19-21). In her grief, Naomi (Mara) tries to push everyone away. But her daughter-in-law Ruth doesn't leave her to believe that great lie that loss loves to whisper to us, “You are all alone.” Ruth stays. Ruth embraces her despite her despair.

Name it what you will—your besties, your book club, your co-workers, your siblings, your mom—these are the people who cling to you even as you declare, like Naomi, that your life is empty (Ruth 1:20-21). In God's faithfulness to us, we learn to be faithful to others even in the worst of times. Faithful friendships are the people who show up with a casserole (and know when you couldn't possibly eat another bite of lasagna) and a hug and maybe a bottle of wine or ice cream on your most difficult days. These are the people that know that they may not be able to fix what is happening or what has happened to you, but they can and will bear witness. These friends will believe (even when you can't) that the sun will rise again. And in that kind of hold-your-hand-through-the-worst-of-it love, may we find hope.

READ THIS BLESSING

for friends who hold us up (p. 60)

FROM THE LIVES WE
ACTUALLY HAVE

God, when I am no longer quite so tall and strong, give me those who hold me up and remind me of who I am and that I'm loved.

REFLECT

1. If you were to rename yourself based on this season of your life, what name would you choose? Why?
2. How have people shown up for you when you are struggling?
3. How did that comfort bring you a glimpse of hope? How can you be that hope for others?

GOING DEEPER

- The Hebrew word used to describe the love, embrace, and commitment of Ruth and Naomi is *hesed*, which can be translated as mercy, compassion, love, grace, and faithfulness. But none of these completely capture the emotion or feeling of this word. *Hesed* describes a sense of love and loyalty, of taking action on behalf of someone who is in need. In this story, Naomi rejoices in the “hesed” of the Lord because of Ruth’s loyalty, commitment, and faithful action. Ruth and Naomi’s friendship and relationship crossed ethnic and national boundaries (Ruth was an Isrealite, and Naomi was a Moabite). Yet, their faithful relationship is an example of God’s covenant, God’s “*hesed*,” to all the people (no matter where you come from). God works through Ruth and Naomi’s relationship and in doing so it changes the world. And, if you skip ahead to Matthew 1:5, Ruth is listed in the genealogy of Christ (spoiler alert!).
- Paul Zach sings about how “[Our Salvation is Bound up Together](#)” in this beautiful song, also on our Advent Playlist.¹ Listen while reflecting on the friendship of Ruth and Naomi (3 min).
- Share more than joy and good cheer this Christmas season. How can your actions, presence, or gifts be an act of hope to someone who needs it? Could you sing a silly Christmas carol, provide a Christmas meal, write a letter to someone who lives in isolation? Think of how you will act in hope this week.



1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CiW4M9p1h0k> | <http://q-r.to/advent-spotify-playlist>