



bless the
Advent We
Actually Have

A DAILY DEVOTIONAL FOR
THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

By Kate Bowler and The Everything Happens Project

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

* <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 Jesus, 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 lighting 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 Christmas?
2. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.” This is a line from the Christmas 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*



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>

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 afters. 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 Christmas with one less stocking to fill, or perhaps realizing the perfect gift didn't actually fix the broken relationship. Your house may be lacking the joy (or people) you had hoped for. Maybe today you woke up and decided 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 recognize 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 na-

tivity scenes and light the Christ candle on our Advent 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 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.
- NT Wright and Kate had a rich discussion about how God works with us through the hard things in life. [Watch a clip from the conversation here](https://youtu.be/ybR3TSRdVI8?si=Gn73nNNtM4aasdw_) (5 min).¹



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

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

—MATTHEW 2:1-2 (NKJV)

It has been a strange season. Advent is over, and Christmas is here. But for many, it may not feel like Christmas at all. We are still waiting for miracles. We still long for life to feel normal again.

Christmastide (December 25th - January 6th) is about the gradual departure of darkness and the gentle dawning of light at Epiphany. We don't have to cram all of Christmas into one day. At Christmastide, we shed the pressure of “the holidays” and how we always do things, and take on a new, relaxed rhythm of celebration. Kinder. Quirkier. Gentler.

If you have a Christmas manger scene, or crèche, put the baby Jesus in his manger. Find some wise men (or make them out of Legos!) and put them far away. Each day of the Christmastide move the wise men closer and closer to the manger, to Jesus, the light of the world. On January 6th, they arrive, and the season of light begins, Epiphany. Otherwise, each day of Christmastide, do one thing less. Make space. Make it a holiday. Feel free to make them your own.

We've put together a Christmastide playlist for you to listen to over the next twelve days.

Christmastide Playlist:

A separate playlist of CHRISTMAS songs to be played through Jan 6th.



Some of the songs are traditional just to stir memories, and some not so well-known or widely heard at this time of year. Sit under your tree. Let the words wash over you.

We have not been exactly here before, and again it is time to take hold of some fierce hope. Take courage! If you have had a hectic Advent or Christmas Day this year, may this Christmastide be a time for you to release the grip of anticipation and walk toward joy.

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