

DAYBREAKS

Daily Reflections for **Advent** and **Christmas**



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**PATRICIA
LIVINGSTON**

For a moment of stillness in which to pray,
For health and strength,
For a sunset,
For a lessening of fear,
For a connection with friend or family,
For a chance to offer kindness,
For a sense of oneness
with the whole human family,
For something beautiful, inspiring,
funny, delicious, or restful,
We respond with a prayer of gratitude.

Repeat throughout the day:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.*

LUKE 1:46–47



An *Adventure* Is in the Air

The strong opening chords of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” announce the season of Advent. From two Latin words, *venio*, meaning “come,” and *ad*, meaning “to,” *Advent* means “coming to.” The word *adventure* has the same roots. *Venio* is also the source of the Latin word *ventus*, or “wind.”

Advent: A strong wind is blowing. An *Adventure* is in the air. Someone is coming. Day is breaking.

“But wait a minute,” one of the little ones in the new generation of my family said last year. “What do you mean he’s *coming*? He came already. In that barn. He already came.”

And so he did. The curious energy of Advent is that we are waiting for something that already happened. We are looking for something we know is already here. It is both right now *and* not yet. We sing “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” yet *Emmanuel* means “God is with us.”

For me, the best preparation for the celebration of the coming of God at Christmas is to deepen awareness of God’s presence every day; to pause in the right-now to see evidence of the yet-to-come. I think of the days of Advent as being like the intriguing little doors on an Advent calendar that look in each day on some aspect of Christmas.

The following reflections are some of the doorways I find in the Emmanuel reality—beauty, kindness, prayer, humor, insight, memory, encounter, music, Scripture. My hope is that they help you notice doors of your own opening.



Alert for God's Love

*I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:
to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

LUKE 2:10–11

The liturgical year closes with weeks of apocalyptic end-time Scriptures. Then, moving into Advent, more warnings. The Advent Gospels in all cycles have an ominous tone, admonishing us, “Be alert! Stay awake! For you do not know when the time will come.” We are challenged to be vigilant lest a thief break in.

Recently I have argued with these Scripture choices. The fear response seems like the wrong way to prepare for the Lord's coming. These days we are surrounded by constant warnings of all kinds, incessant exhortations to beware of enemies sneaking in from every direction.

If I find I need to be challenged to awaken not for danger, but for joy. For beauty, for kindness, for God's humor in unexpected turns of events.

“Wake up for the in-breaking of grace,” I need someone to call out to me. “At an hour you do not expect, the Son of God is coming in an amazing moment of love.” Christmas is about God coming in an amazing moment of love. I want to spend Advent on the lookout for love.

Last year one of my grandsons played an angel in the Christmas pageant. He had one line: “Hark! I bring you glad tidings of great joy.” Long after the play was over, he kept using the word *hark*. (“Hark, Grandma is on the phone!” “Hark, the pizza man is at the door!”)

I am imagining a voice this Advent telling me to *hark*! In some form, there will be glad tidings of great joy.

I was in a crowded mall in early December, surrounded by a cross-section of shopping humanity. Over the din I heard a classic song in the unmistakable voice of the young Bing Crosby, a song about home and Christmas. For the interlude of an indrawn breath, it seemed all the people paused.

In Advent we pause to remember God is calling us home for Christmas. *Home*, the place deep inside us where God is at home in us. *Home*, where we never have to be afraid.

Christmas is about God coming
in an amazing moment of love.



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At Home in Life As It Is



Feeling at home for Christmas is difficult if we don't feel at home in life. Life turns out to be much more complex and challenging than we expect: illness and accidents, failures and broken hearts. Making it worse, we may think something is wrong with *us*, as if life shouldn't be this way.

Years ago I heard a reflection on the differences between the Nativity stories in the two Gospels. Luke's version is the bright side of the story, with singing angels, kneeling shepherds, the donkey and the ox—the *children's* pageant scene. In contrast, the account in Matthew's Gospel is the *adult* Christmas story, fraught with difficulty and danger, vulnerability and flight.

I can still remember the profound effect that insight had on me. It gave me a sense of consolation and relief about my life with its painful challenges as well as its brightness, realizing it is *this* life in which Jesus joined us. A place, however imperfect, where we can be at home.

Jesus joined us in this life.

Salvation Unfolding in Discontinuity



I once heard a speaker point out something shocking that's tucked into the genealogy in Matthew.

Classic Biblical genealogies, he said, are histories of *male* ancestors, the father who begat the son who begat the next son. The list in Matthew 2:1 of the origins of Jesus begins, "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers."

But later, occasionally, appears the name of a woman! And even more startling in this interruption of the usual sequence, these women were not the familiar towering patriarchal wives—Sarah, Rebekah, or Rachel—but were all women shadowed with some kind of scandal or scorn: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba.

The speaker gave their listings in Jesus' bloodline a name, a word I have hung onto ever since. *Discontinuities*, he called them.

Ours is a God who works through discontinuities. Interruptions in the expected pattern do not block God's grace. On the contrary, it is through them that God creates the amazing story of salvation.

So much in the world and in our private lives does not fit the ideal pattern. Advent for me is a time to reconcile with the dynamic of disruption, to remember salvation unfolds in discontinuity: A virgin conceives a child. God becomes human. Death becomes life.

Ours is a God who works through discontinuities.

Prayer in the Waiting



Becoming more at home in the messy reality of life has helped me be more at home in prayer. I've stopped trying to be perfect in some technique, to "make something happen."

I begin most of my prayer by becoming aware of my breathing. I let the breaths become deeper and slower, with the exhalation longer than the inhalation, so the stale air held in by tension can be released. As I breathe, I become more aware of God's presence right here in this moment, whatever the moment might be. The sense of presence moves into gratefulness.

I try to make time for prayer as I start the day, and then I try to remember to practice what I learned from a good friend. She helped me notice that frequently time makes *itself* available, without my choosing it, as the day goes on.

Because Advent is a time of holy waiting, I like it that many of these times are interludes of waiting. Waiting at a red light, waiting in a grocery line, waiting for the computer to come on. My friend's philosophy has given me such a different attitude toward these involuntary pauses. Being put on hold, being left in a dentist's chair, pumping gas at a very slow pump, waiting to fall asleep at night. It is as if God is saying: "Just be still now, take a breath, know that I am here. Rest in my love."

*The messy reality of life has helped me
be more at home in prayer.*

Deepening Trust



Advent is the season of waiting and trusting, of hoping in the promise of the One who is to come. Although on one hand we know the Messiah is with us, on the other hand we have ongoing experiences of darkness in which we feel the need to be saved. In our own lives,

and in these tumultuous times for our human family and our planet, we need to keep reaching for trust.

For years I thought trust was a matter of will. I thought I ought to be able to just make up my mind to be trusting. It seemed to be my own failing if I felt overwhelmed or afraid.

Someone once said it's impossible to trust God in the abstract or just because we're told God is trustworthy. He said we learn to trust God because of our own ongoing experiences of God's goodness. We need to pay attention to goodness, to receive it, let it in, savor it. Then, he said, we need to remember it so we can call on the memories when goodness seems absent.

One powerful Advent practice can be focusing on goodness. I like the image that every day is a door in the Advent calendar of our lives—we move into the day waiting to see what goodness is coming for us from God.

We need to keep reaching for trust.

Sharing Goodness



Deliberately focusing on goodness to deepen our trust in God is more important than we might realize. Negativity has great power. Magazines with scandals on the cover sell out faster than issues filled with good news. Negative campaigning has exhausted and sickened our nation, but candidates defend attack ads as being significantly more effective in defeating an opponent than positive statements.

Negativity can dominate our awareness. Psychologists say it takes twenty affirmations—twenty pieces of positive feedback about ourselves—to offset one comment that hurts our feelings. Pain eclipses comfort. A burn on one finger can wipe out our sense of well-being for hours.

To counterbalance our propensity for being pulled into the dark, and to keep our trust alive, we must hold carefully to our experiences of goodness.

I am helped by a practice I call The One Good Thing. It's an agreement with family and friends to pay attention to goodness and, on a regular basis, share with each other one good thing that has happened since the last time we were together. I find it trains my mind. *We see what we look for.* If we look for bad things, they are everywhere to claim attention. If we look for good things, we can be amazed at the abundance all around.

In Advent, we try to wait in trust. Noticing and receiving goodness builds our trust. Sharing that goodness with others deepens it for us all.

*To keep trust alive, we must hold carefully
to our experiences of goodness.*



A Blessing on Every Corner



Something happens when we are on the alert for goodness. We realize how much we take for granted. We notice we are surrounded by profusions of blessings all the time. In a beautiful tradition, Jewish people recite *brakhot*, prayers of thanksgiving in which they bless God for instilling goodness in every aspect of creation.

Catholics know the *brakhot* from the prayer at the preparation of the gifts. We said that prayer last night when I shared what had happened to me as I was sitting at a long stoplight. A man standing on the corner facing traffic was holding a sign. He seemed younger than the usual panhandler, his long hair more like a musician's than a homeless person's.

As I got closer, I noticed the sign had been beautifully lettered. I was stunned when I saw what he had written: "Can you spare a smile?"

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I laughed in delight, and he smiled back with a face that could have been painted by Raphael. Our eyes held in an exchange I can only describe as *blessing*.

We are surrounded by profusions of blessings.



ADVENT calls us to stay awake and be prepared. The curious energy of Advent is that we are waiting for something that already happened. We are looking for something we know is already here. It is both right now *and* not yet.

Daybreaks by Patricia Livingston offers daily Advent meditations to help deepen your awareness of God's presence every day as you prepare for the celebration of the Christ child. Livingston's reflections, drawn from everyday experiences, brim with insights into the mystery of our faith. Let each daily reflection be a doorway into "the Emmanuel reality—beauty, kindness, prayer, humor, insight, memory, encounter, music, Scripture."

PATRICIA LIVINGSTON is a sought-after speaker, author, and retreat director who stirs the spirit with her stories of day-to-day experiences of God's goodness and love. A married mother and grandmother, Pat's style of inspirational writing speaks to men and women alike.

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