

# Simplicity

an Advent journey

Church of the Atonement

# Notes

# Living in Balance

*First Week*

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## Collect

*for the First Week of Advent*

Almighty God,  
give us grace to cast away the works of darkness,  
and put on the armor of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life  
in which your Son Jesus Christ  
came to visit us in great humility;  
that in the last day,  
when he shall come again in his glorious majesty  
to judge both the living and the dead,  
we may rise to the life immortal;  
through him who lives and reigns with you  
and the Holy Spirit, one God,  
now and for ever. Amen.

## Introductions

### Practice Mindfulness

*Breathing with Psalm 46*

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear,  
though the earth be moved,  
and though the mountains be toppled  
into the depths of the sea;  
Though its waters rage and foam,  
and though the mountains tremble  
at its tumult.  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.  
There is a river whose streams make glad  
the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.  
God is in the midst of her;  
she shall not be overthrown;  
God shall help her at the break of day.

The nations make much ado,  
and the kingdoms are shaken;  
God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away.  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.  
Come now and look  
upon the works of the LORD,  
what awesome things he has done on earth.  
It is he who makes war to cease  
in all the world;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,  
and burns the shields with fire.  
“Be still, then, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations;  
I will be exalted in the earth.”  
The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

### Practice Playfulness

*The Magic Bird*

## Practice Attention

Henri Nouwen, from “A Spirituality of Waiting” (1993)

Waiting is not a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, “Get going!” Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don’t just sit there and wait!” For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something. ...

A waiting person is a patient person. The word *patience* means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.”

But there is more. Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: “I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go away.” We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears.

But Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, “I am the handmaid of the Lord...let what you have said be done to me” (Luke 1:38). She was saying, “I don’t know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen.” She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God’s love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

## Practice Theology

1. For you, what is the worst part of waiting? When has waiting been the hardest for you? Did you try to get out of it by *doing* something?


2. Nouwen describes *patience* as a “willingness to stay in where we are and live the situation out to the full” and, like Mary and Elizabeth, “nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her.” What does the idea of *nurturing the moment* mean to you? When have you experienced this?

3. Nouwen makes a distinction between *wishes* and *hope*. Wishes are concrete things we want to happen in the future. Hope is open-ended waiting, trusting that “something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings.” What are you wishing for right now? How might you move from wishing to hope?


4. Think again of the magic birds we played with. What do you think are the connections between waiting, hope, and *living with balance*?

# Practice Song


Verses 3, 4, 5, and 8.



(Dec. 23) 1 O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, and ran - som  
 (Dec. 17) 2 O come, thou Wis - dom from on high, who or - derest  
 \* (Dec. 18) 3 O come, O come, thou Lord of might, who to thy  
 \* (Dec. 19) 4 O come, thou Branch of Jes - se's tree, free them from  
 \* (Dec. 20) 5 O come, thou Key of Da - vid, come, and o - pen  
 (Dec. 21) 6 O come, thou Day - spring from on high, and cheer us  
 (Dec. 22) 7 O come, De - sire of na - tions, bind in one the  
 \* (Dec. 23) 8 O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, and ran - som



1 cap - tive Is - ra - el, that mourns in lone - ly ex - ile  
 2 all things might - i - ly; to us the path of know - ledge  
 \* 3 tribes on Si - nai's height in an - cient times didst give the  
 \* 4 Sa - tan's ty - ran - ny that trust thy might - y power to  
 \* 5 wide our heaven - ly home; make safe the way that leads on  
 6 by thy draw - ing nigh; dis - perse the gloom - y clouds of  
 7 hearts of all man - kind; bid thou our sad di - vi - sions  
 \* 8 cap - tive Is - ra - el, that mourns in lone - ly ex - ile



1 here un - til the Son of God ap - pear.  
 2 show, and teach us in her ways to go.  
 \* 3 law, in cloud, and ma - jes - ty, and awe.  
 \* 4 save, and give them vic - tory o'er the grave. Re - joice! Re - joice!  
 \* 5 high, and close the path to mis - er - y.  
 6 night, and death's dark shad - ow put to flight.  
 7 cease, and be thy - self our King of Peace.  
 \* 8 here un - til the Son of God ap - pear.



Em - man - u - el shall come to thee, O Is - ra - el!

The stanzas may be used as antiphons with "The Song of Mary" on the dates given.

Words: Latin, ca. 9th cent.; ver. *Hymnal 1940*, alt. Copyright © The Church Pension Fund. Music: *Veni, veni, Emmanuel*, plainsong, Mode 1, Processionale, 15th cent.; adapt. Thomas Helmore (1811-1890); acc. Richard Proulx (b. 1937).

# Letting Go

*Second Week*

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## Collect

*for the Second Week of Advent*

Merciful God,  
who sent your messengers the prophets  
to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation:  
Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins,  
that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer;  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Practice Mindfulness

*Receive and Release Prayer*

## Practice Playfulness

*Draw “emptiness.”*

## Practice Attention

Loretta Ross-Gotta, from *Letters from the Holy Ground* (2000)

Jesus observed, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Yet we act, for the most part, as though without us God can do nothing. We think we have to make Christmas come, which is to say we think we have to bring about the redemption of the universe on our own. When all God needs is a willing womb, a place of safety, nourishment, and love. “Oh, but nothing will get done,” you say. “If I don’t do it, Christmas won’t happen.” And we crowd out Christ with our fretful fears.

God asks us to give away everything of ourselves. The gift of greatest efficacy and power that we can offer God and creation is not our skills, gifts, abilities, and possessions. The wise men had their gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Paul and Peter had their preaching. Mary offered only space, love, belief. What is it that delivers Christ into the world – preaching, art, writing, scholarship, social justice? Those are all gifts well worth sharing. But preachers lose their charisma, scholarship grows pedantic, social justice alone cannot save us. In the end, when all other human gifts have met their inevitable limitation, it is the recollected one, the bold virgin with a heart in love with God who makes a sanctuary of her life, who delivers Christ who then delivers us. ...

Imagine a Christmas service where the worshipers come in their holiday finery to find a sanctuary empty of all the glittering decorations, silent of holiday carols. What if this year you canceled the church decoration committee and the worship committee and called off the extra rehearsals and the church school pageant? What if on Christmas Eve people came and sat in the dim pews, and someone stood up and said, “Something happened here while we were all out at the malls, while we were baking cookies and fretting about whether we bought our brother-in-law the right gift: Christ was born. God is here”? We wouldn’t need the glorious choruses and the harp and the bell choir and the organ. We wouldn’t need the tree strung with lights. We wouldn’t have to deny that painful dissonance between the promise and hope of Christmas and a world wracked with sin and evil. There wouldn’t be that embarrassing conflict over the historical truth of the birth stories and whether or not Mary was really a virgin. And no one would have to preach sermons to work up our belief.

All of that would seem gaudy and shallow in comparison to the sanctity of that still sanctuary. And we, hushed and awed by something greater and wiser and kinder than we, would kneel of one accord in the stillness. A peace would settle over the planet like a velvet coverlet drawn over a sleeping child. The world would recollect itself and discover itself held in the womb of the Mother of God. We would be filled with all the fullness of God, even as we filled the emptiness of the Savior’s heart with ours.

The intensity and strain that many of us bring to Christmas must suggest to some onlookers that, on the whole, Christians do not seem to have gotten the point of it. Probably few of us have the faith or the nerve to tamper with hallowed Christmas traditions on a large scale, or with other holiday celebrations. But a small experiment might prove interesting. What if, instead of doing something, we were to be something special? Be a womb. Be a dwelling for God. Be surprised.



## Practice Theology

1. It's not very hard to imagine the empty sanctuary described on Christmas. We lived this during the lockdowns, at least in a way. What was/is this experience of emptiness on Christmas (and other holy days) like for you?

2. Ross-Gotta says that we “crowd out Jesus with our fretful fears.” We think we have to *make* Christmas happen. What are the ways -- during this season and otherwise -- in which you feel find yourself thinking “without us, God can do nothing.”

3. The given title of this piece is “To Be Virgin.” Do the ideas of *emptiness* and *letting go* enrich, change, and/or complicate the meaning of Mary's identity as a virgin mother?

4. Look back at the drawing you made on p. 7. What does your own drawing reveal to you about God, Jesus, Mary, and/or the meaning of Advent and Christmas? (Feel free to share your drawing!)

# Practice Song

1 In the bleak mid - win - ter, frost - y wind made moan,  
 2 Our God, heaven can - not hold him, nor — earth sus - tain;  
 3 An - gels and arch - an - gels may have gath - ered there,  
 4 What — can I give him, poor — as I am?

earth stood hard as i - ron, wa - ter like a stone;  
 heaven and earth shall flee a - way when he comes to reign:  
 cher - u - bim and se - ra - phim throng - ed the air;  
 If I were a shep - herd, I would bring a lamb;

snow had fal - len, snow on snow, snow — on — snow,  
 in the bleak mid - win - ter a sta - ble - place suf - ficed  
 but his mo - ther on - ly, in her maid - en bliss,  
 if I were a wise — man, I would do my part;

in the bleak mid - win - ter, long a - go.  
 the Lord — God in - car - nate, Je - sus Christ.  
 wor - shipped the be - lov - ed with a kiss.  
 yet what I can I give him — give my heart.

Words: Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). Music: *Cranham*, Gustav Theodore Holst (1874-1934).

# Comfort and Joy

*Third Week*

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## Collect

*for the Third Week of Advent*

Stir up your power, O Lord,  
and with great might come among us;  
and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins,  
let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit,  
be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

## Practice Mindfulness

*Loving Kindness Prayer*

May you be happy.  
May you be healthy.  
May you be safe.  
May you be free of anguish.

## Practice Playfulness

*A Letter to Santa*

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## Practice Attention

Howard Thurman, from *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963)

*Please forgive the sexist language, which was common usage at the time.*

To Jesus, God breathed through all that is: the sparrow overcome by sudden death in its flight; the lily blossoming on the rocky hillside; the grass of the field and the clouds, light and burdenless or weighted down with unshed waters; the madman in chains or wandering among the barren rocks in the wasteland; the little baby in his mother's arms; the strutting insolence of the Roman Legion, the brazen queries of the tax collector; the children at play or old men quibbling in the marketplace; the august Sanhedrin fighting for its life amidst the arrogances of empire; the whisper of those who had forgotten Jerusalem, the great voiced utterance of the prophets who remembered -- to Jesus, God breathed through all that is.

To Jesus, God was Creator of life and the living substance, the Living Stream upon which all things moved, the Mind containing time, space, and all their multitudinous offspring. And beyond all these, He was Friend and Father. The time most precious for the Master was at close of day. This was the time for the long breath, when all the fragments left by the commonplace, all the little hurts and big aches, came to rest; when the mind could be freed of the immediate demand, and voices that had been stilled by the long day's work could once more be heard; when there could be the deep sharing of innermost secrets and the laying bare of heart and mind -- yes, the time most precious for him was at close of day.

But there were other times: "A great while before day," says the Book -- the night was long and wearisome because the day had been full of jabbing annoyances; the high resolve of some winged moment had spent itself, no longer sure, no longer free, and then vanished as if it had never been; the need, the utter urgency was for some fresh assurance, the healing touch of a heavenly wing -- "a great while before day" he found his way to the quiet place in the hills. And prayed. ...

When the hunger in a man's heart merges with what seems to be the fundamental intent of life, communion with God the Creator of Life is not only possible but urgent. The hunger of the heart, which is a part of the givenness of God, becomes one with the givenness of God as expressed in the world of nature and in human history. ...

The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us. The aim is to get rid of whatever may so distract the mind and encumber the life that we function without this awareness, or as if it were not possible. It must be constantly remembered that this hunger may be driven into disguise, may take a wide variety of twisted forms; but it never disappears -- it cannot. Prayer is the experience of the individual as he seeks to make the hunger dominant and controlling in his life. It has to move more and more to the central place until it becomes a conscious and deliberate activity of the spirit. When the hunger becomes the core of the individual's consciousness, what was a sporadic act of turning toward God becomes the very climate of the soul. ...

This was the most remarkable impact of the life of the Master upon those whom he encountered. It was this that stilled the ragings of the madman, that called little children to Him, that made sinners know that their sins were forgiven. His whole countenance glowed with the glory of the Father. And the secret? "A great while before day, he withdrew to a solitary place and prayed, *as was his custom.*"

## Practice Theology

1. Look back at your Letter to Santa. How does our childhood yearning for a special gift compare with Thurman's idea of "the hunger of the heart"?

2. What are the aspects of Jesus' prayer life, as described by Thurman, that spark your imagination?

3. Thurman says that the point of spiritual disciplines is to "clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us." Is there anything that blocks your awareness of God in you ... OR, do you feel blocked from experiencing comfort and joy?

4. Thurman was a towering intellectual and theologian of the Civil Rights Movement, and yet he devoted much of his thought and writing to spirituality and mysticism. What do you think might be the connection(s) between social justice and spiritual practice?

## Practice Song

It came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth  
To touch their harps of gold;  
“Peace on the earth, good will to men  
From heaven’s all-gracious King” –  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come  
With peaceful wings unfurled,  
And still their heavenly music floats  
O’er all the weary world;  
Above its sad and lowly plains  
They bend on hovering wing,  
And ever o’er its Babel-sounds  
The blessed angels sing.

But with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song which they bring; –  
Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the angels sing!

And ye, beneath life’s crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow,  
Look now! for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing; –  
Oh, rest beside the weary road  
And hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on  
By prophet bards foretold,  
When with the ever circling years  
Comes round the age of gold;  
When Peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
Which now the angels sing.

# Incarnate Faith

*Fourth Week*

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## Collect

*for the Fourth Week of Advent*

Purify our conscience, Almighty God,  
by your daily visitation,  
that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming,  
may find in us a mansion prepared for himself;  
who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Practice Mindfulness

*The Feel of Clay*

## Practice Playfulness

*Sculpting with Scripture*

## Practice Attention

Barbara Brown Taylor, from *An Altar in the World* (2000)

I came late to the understanding that God loved all of me -- not just my spirit but also my flesh. Like many young people raised in the fifties, I grew up with a lot of questions and unearned shame about my ripening body, which was not ripening in a way that matched any of the movie posters or Playboy magazines by which female beauty was measured in those days. Barbie dolls did not help. When the movie *Barbarella* came out, starring Jane Fond in a black vinyl bodysuit, I gained a new nickname meant to mortify me, which it did.

When understanding finally came -- not by reason, but by faith -- the first thing I understood was that it was not possible to trust that God loved all of me, including my body, without also trusting that God loved all bodies everywhere. God loved the bodies of the hungry children and indentured women along with the bodies of sleek athletes and cigar-smoking tycoons. While we might not have one other thing in common, we all wore skin. We all had breath and beating hearts. Most of us had wept, although not for the same reasons. Few of our bodies worked the way we wanted them to. The vast majority of us were afraid of dying. ...

The daily practice of incarnation -- of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh -- is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper? With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, he did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do -- specific ways of being together in their bodies -- that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself.

After he was gone, they would still have God's Word, but that Word was going to need some new flesh. The disciples were going to need something warm and near that they could bump into on a regular basis, something so real that they would not be able to intellectualize it and so essentially untidy that there was no way they could ever gain control over it. So Jesus gave them things they could get their hands on, things that would require them to get close enough to touch one another. In the case of the meal, he gave them things they could smell and taste and swallow. In the case of the feet, he gave them things to wash that were attached to real human beings, so that they could not bend over them without being drawn into one another's lives. ... "Do this," he said -- not *believe* this but *do* this -- "in remembrance of me."

Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas finds most Christians far too spiritual in the practice of their faith. Christianity "is not a set of beliefs or doctrines one believes in order to be a Christian," he says, "but rather Christianity is to have one's body shaped, one's habits determined, in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable." ...

When I hear people talk about what is wrong with organized religion, or why their mainline churches are failing, I hear about bad music, inept clergy, mean congregations, and preoccupations with institutional maintenance. I almost never hear about the intellectualization of faith, which strikes me as a far greater danger than anything else on the list. In an age of information overload ... the last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more *about* God. *More God*.



## Practice Theology

1. Do you relate to Brown Taylor's experiences of shame about her body?
2. What do you make of the connection between loving one's own body and being able to love other bodies?
3. What would it look like to redefine Christian faith in terms of our bodies rather than our beliefs?
4. What do you think about Brown Taylor's final paragraph about what is really wrong with organized religion?

1 O lit - tle town of Beth - le - hem, how still we see thee lie!  
 2 For Christ is born of Ma - ry; and gath - ered all a - bove,  
 3 How si - lent - ly, how si - lent - ly, the won - drous gift is given!  
 \*4 Where child - ren pure and hap - py pray to the bless - ed Child,  
 5 O ho - ly Child of Beth - le - hem, de - scend to us, we pray;

1 A - bove thy deep and dream - less sleep the si - lent stars go by;  
 2 while mor - tals sleep, the an - gels keep their watch of won - dering love.  
 3 So God im - parts to hu - man hearts the bless - ings of his heaven.  
 4 where mis - er - y cries out to thee, Son of the mo - ther mild;  
 5 cast out our sin and en - ter in, be born in us to - day.

1 yet in thy dark streets shin - eth the ev - er - last - ing Light;  
 2 O morn - ing stars, to - geth - er pro - claim the ho - ly birth!  
 3 No ear may hear his com - ing, but in this world of sin,  
 4 where char - i - ty stands watch - ing and faith holds wide the door,  
 5 We hear the Christ - mas an - gels the great glad tid - ings tell;

1 the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee to - night.  
 2 and prais - es sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth.  
 3 where meek souls will re - ceive him, still the dear Christ en - ters in.  
 4 the dark night wakes, the glo - ry breaks, and Christ - mas comes once more.  
 5 O come to us, a - bide with us, our Lord Em - man - u - el!

Words: Phillips Brooks (1835-1893). Music: *St. Louis*, Lewis H. Redner (1831-1908).

# Notes

