



# Anchor in Advent

An Integrative Journey to  
Slow Down in the Christmas Season

created by A. C. Grace

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Back Cover: Personal photograph from a backyard Christmas season sunrise in Knoxville, Tennessee

*All Scripture translations are from the New International Version (NIV).*

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# An Invitation.

Year after year, I genuinely hope to slow down and engage deeply in the Advent season. And year after year, the weeks fly by faster than I can catch them. Before I know it, it's the New Year, and then next thing I know, we're nearing Christmas again. I know I'm not alone in my longing to slow down and savor this time of year, so I decided to put together these pages to help myself and others cultivate rhythms to anchor in the Advent season.

In these pages, you'll find an integration of some of my favorite things (cue Julie Andrews...!). Contemplative practices, raw theological reflection, parts-work, polyvagal theory, mindful movement, and more, are all interwoven into a tapestry of simple prompts that you are welcome to take or leave as you please. My hope is that these pages will draw you into the embrace of Emmanuel, God with us, whose coming is what we slow down to enjoy in this season. This hope is not only for the shiniest most spiritual parts of you, but for all parts of you -- the hidden or hopeless depths of your soul that don't even know how to engage in a devotional, Scripture, or prayer right now -- the angry or exhausted parts of you that are just done with everything, including God -- or the brokenhearted weary parts of you that are in too much pain to keep going. May all parts of you -- all the depths of your soul -- know that you are welcome to be right where you are in this space and in this season.

*Cheerful and joyful depths, you are welcome here.  
Grieving and hurting depths, you are welcome here.  
Shamed and hidden depths, you are welcome here.*

*A. C. Grace*

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# Notes & Disclaimers



This will intentionally be a different kind of Advent journey than you have probably experienced before. There are an incredible number of Advent devotions that will take you through the gospel narratives of Mary's journey and Jesus' birth. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel of these Advent bible studies, my goal is to create a space where you can engage with all parts of your embodied being in this season -- an invitation to all the depths of your soul to be present and anchor in Advent. Then, when you are engaging with Scripture and prayer in devotions or at church, you can more readily invite all the depths of your soul to be present in those experiences.

All too often, we only bring the most spiritual parts of us to devotions or Sunday morning services, and for good reason. There are plenty of shame messages that swarm around in our faith communities, explicitly or implicitly telling us to hide parts of us that are unwelcome. But, **God didn't come in human form just to be with the most shiny or spiritual parts of us.** Christ shared intimate meals and moments with the most marginalized and judged people in society. God longs to be 'God with us' with *all of us*. These pages are to help you connect with all the facets of your soul, in order to connect those facets of your soul with God's care -- to experience the wonder and awe of God with us in a deeply embodied and holistic way.

So, as much as I love getting knee deep in the Hebrew and Greek of Scripture, that's not what we're here for. In these pages, we are here to slow down in the simplest of ways, savoring short words and phrases to anchor us in the Advent season. If you'd like to dig deeper into the Scripture verses we'll look at, I highly recommend the free resources available from the Bible Project ([bibleproject.com](http://bibleproject.com)). They have specific videos and resources for Advent and the gospels.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a prompt for each Sunday of Advent, followed by a longer prompt for each week of Advent. The Sunday prompts will help us anchor in for the week. The weekly prompts provide options to slowly move through each week at your own pace. You can work through the weekly prompts a little bit each day of the week, or a couple of times a week, whatever your schedule allows for (e.g., slow down with the Sunday prompts over the weekend, and then move through Weekly prompts each day, or M/W/F, or T/F, whatever works for you!). There is a simply calendar that you can use to plan or track your journey if you like such things!

*Disclaimer: No part of this PDF is intended to take the place of professional mental health services. If you are in need of mental health care, find a provider near you on [PsychologyToday.com](http://PsychologyToday.com).*



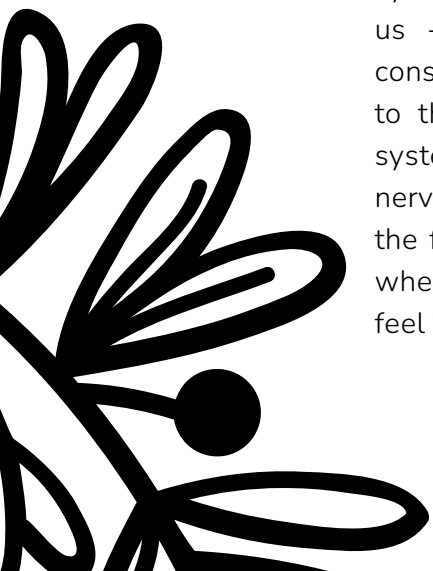
# Terms & Concepts

Throughout the prompts and reflection questions I will use a variety of terms from the counseling and therapy world. In my experiences receiving therapy, and being a Christian counselor, I love seeing how therapeutic work can help us identify and tend to the depths of our souls, which is why I integrate therapeutic terms and concepts with soul care and spiritual formation resources. In case it's helpful to have a brief explanation of what I mean by the following terms, please feel free to read over this page and reference these terms as needed:

**A 'part' or 'parts' of a person:** I use these terms interchangeably with *depths of the soul* and *facets of our beings*. I like to think about parts as embodied perspectives -- ways through which we see the world. These perspectives are often connected to a specific age or developmental stage/experience from our lifetime that is also often anchored in a certain nervous system state or tone. The Psalms give us many examples of different parts of psalmists singing and crying out from different perspectives -- in different states of the soul -- describing different nervous system states of distress, despair, or safety. Therapeutic approaches like Internal Family Systems (IFS), shadow work, and inner child work provide practical roadmaps to identify and tend to these 'parts' that are often stuck in past muscle memory of fear, shame, anxiety, or overwhelm.

**The state of the soul:** Integrating with parts-work and polyvagal theory, I use this term to refer to the multifaceted landscape of the soul that often includes terrain of consolation -- the lush and warm spaces where we can sense and tune into God's nearness -- alongside terrain of desolation -- the cold and desert spaces where all we can sense is God's absence. I assume the state of the soul is rarely only one pure experience (again, see the Psalms!). I also assume that the state of the nervous system impacts the state of the soul. With this, I assume the states of our souls and nervous systems impact the way we see things, activating or deactivating different parts of us, the embodied perspectives that shape how we experience the world around us.

**Nervous system states:** Since this is not an educational or clinical resource, we'll keep things (over!)simplified here, considering three main states our nervous systems might be in, which is intertwined with the state of the soul and parts of us -- the embodied perspectives that we see the world through. When considering these three states of the nervous system, we're technically referring to the autonomic nervous system (which I'll simply refer to as the nervous system). Instead of getting lost in the weeds, you can think of these three nervous system states across a spectrum where we experience some degree of the following: (1) a state where we feel calm, peaceful, and/or safe; (2) a state where we feel distressed, activated, and/or reactive; and (3) a state where we feel frozen, overwhelmed and/or as though we are shutting down.



*Anchor in*

*and Slow Down*

*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday*

Monday • Tuesday • Wednesday • Thursday • Friday • Saturday

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday*

Monday • Tuesday • Wednesday • Thursday • Friday • Saturday

*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday*

Monday • Tuesday • Wednesday • Thursday • Friday • Saturday

*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday*

Monday • Tuesday • Wednesday • Thursday • Friday • Saturday



# 1st Sunday of Advent



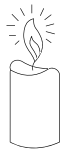
Throughout each week of Advent, we will journey through simple snippets of Scriptures and breath prayers. Before we jump in, we're going to pause and consider how we're entering these pages. This will create space to intentionally invite all parts of us to engage through our Advent journey, helping us guard against only bringing the most shiny and spiritual parts of us to this space. Take some nice deep breaths, letting out some heavy sighs, and reflect on the questions below. Consider writing or drawing your raw reactions to each. Take a walk or chat with a friend to process further.

*pause • breathe in • and let out a heavy sigh*

**How do you imagine your current context will shape your perspective as you enter Advent this year?** *Where does the season of Advent this year fit into the seasons of your life right now? What has been going on in your life, and what are you anticipating ahead? How do these things impact the state of your soul and how you view life right now?*

**How do different 'parts' of you feel about Advent this year?** *Are there parts of you that feel heavy or sad? Are there any depths of your soul that want to hide away and not be bothered? Are there parts of you that are angry with God and don't want to engage here? Are there parts of you that don't want to pause and slow down to think about or notice what's going on inside?*

**What are the longings you're carrying with you into Advent this year?** *In this season of expectancy, what are you carrying or anticipating? Are there ways that the focus on pregnancy and birth in Advent is painful and/or exciting? Do you feel distracted or pulled to focus on things outside of the Advent story? Is there anything that feels more present than the Christmas season right now?*



# 1st Week of Advent

*Immanuel... God with us (Matt 1:23)*



It's easy to become desensitized to words that we know all too well. *Immanuel, God with us*, are words that we don't always feel the full weight of. The God of the universe, Creator of all things, chose to come here in human form to be *with us* in a raw and tangible way.

The choice to be with us in this way was not for some people to have a temporary experience. Instead, God's coming in human form ushers in God's Kingdom, bringing about a new kind of hope. All of the brokenness and pain that we experience in our human form now has the hope of the fullness of God's kingdom one day in New Creation -- all things will be made new and right. This is the hope given to us as Christ comes to be *Immanuel, God with us*.

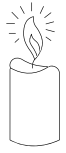
*Inhale • You are ... Exhale • with us*

Read through these reflection questions to survey what we'll explore this week. Then, use the following page to piece together ways you'd like to process these questions throughout the week. Utilize the breathe prayer above at any point and/or throughout these practices this week.

**What are your gut reactions to thinking about God coming to be God with us?** Take a deep breath and notice anything happening in your body, like a feeling in your throat, chest, neck, or gut. Slow down to check in with any thoughts or emotions that are coming to the surface, even if you're not trying to think or feel these things. As you notice what's stirring inside, consider what this tells you about where you are right now and how your soul feels about focusing on God being with us.

**Are there any parts of you, any depths of your soul, that feel as though God wouldn't really come to be with them?** A thought like, "Well, maybe God would come to be with this part of me, or with that person, but not this part of me." Is there any part of you that can resonate with a thought like this? If so, what's the perspective of this part of you like? What is the perspective or the reasoning of this part of you for feeling this way? Rather than trying to argue with a perspective or part, consider taking a breath and simply noticing how this part of you sees the world, including God, others, and yourself. With curiosity, see what it's like to tune in with how this part of you sees the world, offering empathy rather than judgement for any possible 'bad theology.' Consider how Christ's tenderness would likely come alongside this part of you with compassion, and how this might be different from what you've experienced in human relationships.





# Immanuel... God with us

Consider slowly processing the questions and reflections from the previous page throughout this week through the activities below. These can be as short, lengthy, and/or repeated as desired.

Spend 10-20+ minutes mindfully breathing and stretching, noticing where in your body you feel any reactions or things stirring internally.

- *This might be tension that you slowly breath into, stretch out, and/or gently massage.*
- *This might be joy or excitement that you breath into, stretching into a larger movement, taking up space as you delight in that reaction, maybe even skipping or dancing a bit (any joyful movement)*
- *This might be connecting body sensations and awareness with the idea of certain parts of you, or embodied perspectives, having gut reactions to thinking about God coming to be with us. Consider noticing where in your body you are most aware of certain parts or perspectives that you hold internally (e.g., a hurting part of the soul felt as heaviness in your chest or gut).*

Set aside 15-20+ minutes to draw out the different parts of you that you are starting to notice.

- *This can simply look like taking a piece of paper and drawing stick figures with simple labels (e.g., the part of me that tries to get it right; the part of me that's really exhausted; the part of me that doesn't have any hope; the little kid in me that's sad; the part of me that I keep hidden).*
- *You can give speech bubbles or thought bubbles to parts of you that you draw to further explore how these different parts of you see the world around you and how they feel about Advent (e.g., an exhausted part of you thinking -- I just want to take a nap, or a grieving depth of the soul connected to the thought -- how am I supposed to celebrate Christ's birth and new life when all I feel is the pain and sadness of death?).*

Sit in gentle stillness for 5-10+ minutes, placing one hand over your heart, and another hand on the side of your face (*this is an exercise adapted from Deb Dana's work that explores the face-heart connection of the ventral vagal state, the nervous system state where we feel calm and safe*). When we feel safe and connected, there is a palpable connection between our face and our heart, a beautiful way God created us and connection in relationships. Explore what it's like to sit with one hand over your heart, and the other on the side of your face, as an embodied experience to connect with the relational facets of God coming to be Immanuel, God with us.

- *Notice the emotions, thoughts, or body sensations that naturally stir up in this experience.*
- *Consider how your hands on your heart and face can represent a sense of God being with you -- all parts of you. Are there any parts of you that are glad to receive this? Any parts of you that feel overwhelmed or even sad? Even if you don't have logical reasons for your reactions, simple take a nice deep breath and notice how the different facets of your being experience this posture.*

Go for a silent walk to let it all settle.

- *Whether it's a short stroll or a lengthy hike, spend some time in silence.*
- *If your mind wanders, gently anchor in the words: Immanuel, God with us.*
- *If you notice critical voices or perspectives inside, kindly ask these parts to take a step back and give you some space to settle in silence.*





## 2nd Sunday of Advent



As we anchor in today, I encourage you to pause and reflect on this past week. How did you experience slowing down in any of the practices you explored? How connected or disconnected did you feel from the depths of your soul? Are there any parts of you that are frustrated with how the first week went, or how the weeks are set up? Wherever you are, let yourself take some nice deep breaths, letting out some heavy sighs, and reflect on the questions below. Consider writing or drawing your raw reactions to each. Take a walk or chat with a friend to process further.

*pause • breathe in • and let out a heavy sigh*

**What is the state of your soul as you enter in this week?** Another way to ask this is simply, how is it with your soul? Whatever you notice for this and the following questions, take a nice deep breath and notice this with curiosity. If any voices or perspectives of self-criticism or shame pop up, kindly ask this part of you to take a step back to give you some space to breath and anchor in.

**If it's helpful, you can consider the state of your nervous system as you enter the week -- are you feeling calm/peaceful/safe/relaxed, stressed/anxious/frustrated/tired, and/or overwhelmed/paralyzed/hopeless/shut down?** Do you sense that different parts of you would have different answers to these questions?

**Are there ways that you notice the state of your nervous system being intertwined with the state of our soul?** e.g., are you feeling agitated and a bit on edge, along with a sense of a restless soul, not feeling able to be totally present to slow down or anchor into this space?



## 2nd Week of Advent

# Mercy (Luke 1:50; 54; 58; 72; 78)



In Luke 1:50-78, we see the word mercy five times in reference to God's mercy, twice in Mary's Magnificat, once as Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives hear God had shown her great mercy, and twice in Zechariah's prophecy. If you'd like, read through the first chapter of Luke, noticing these references.

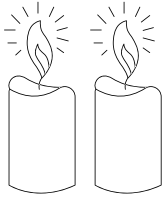
This week we're going to slow down and savor this core facet of God's character, which comes to life in human form in the person of Christ, and is embedded in our beings as God's creations who bear God's likeness. As familiar as we likely are with the fact that God is merciful, we're going to see what it might be like to invite all the depths of our souls to steep in the sweetness of God's mercy in this second week of Advent.

Inhale • You are ... Exhale • merciful

Read through these reflection questions to survey what we'll explore this week. Then, use the following page to piece together ways you'd like to process these questions throughout the week. Utilize the breathe prayer above at any point and/or throughout these practices this week.

**Do you notice any gut reactions to the simple statements above about God being merciful?** Take a deep breath and notice anything happening in your body, like a feeling in your throat, chest, neck, or gut. Slow down to check in with any thoughts or emotions that are coming to the surface, even if you're not trying to think or feel these things. As you notice what's stirring inside, consider what this tells you about where you are right now and how your soul feels about focusing on God's mercy.

**Are there any parts of you, any depths of your soul, that feel as though God isn't really or always merciful?** A thought like, "Well, sure, I can recite that God is merciful and gracious, but I didn't see that or feel that when \_\_\_\_\_ happened." Is there any part of you that can resonate with a thought like this? If so, what's the perspective of this part of you like? What is the perspective or the reasoning of this part of you for feeling this way? Rather than trying to argue with a perspective or part, consider taking a breath and simply noticing how this part of you sees the world, including God, others, and yourself. With curiosity, see what it's like to tune in with how this part of you sees the world, offering empathy rather than judgement for any possible 'bad theology.' Consider how Christ's tenderness might come alongside this part of you with compassion, and how this might be different from what you've experienced in human relationships that lacked mercy or empathy.



# Mercy

Consider slowly processing the questions and reflections from the previous page throughout this week through the activities below. These can be as short, lengthy, and/or repeated as desired. For this and each following week, feel free to adapt practices from previous weeks as well.

In one or two sittings, set aside 15-20+ minutes to draw in response to the following prompts:

- 1: Draw a picture that represents how you (and/or parts of you) envision God's posture and face when you do not experience God as merciful.
  - This might be informed by messages you received from pastors, parents, or other sources that have depicted God not being merciful or lacking in mercy. There might be parts of you that deeply resonate with not seeing God as merciful, or maybe this is hard to imagine.
- 2: Draw a picture that represents how you (and/or parts of you) envision God's posture and face if it is indeed true that God is merciful.
  - This might be informed by how you genuinely feel, or maybe only a part of you is able to get on board with this. If no parts of you really believe God is truly merciful, considering drawing what you imagine it would be like if God were merciful.

In one or two sittings, spend 10-15+ minutes reflecting on the drawings from the first prompt:

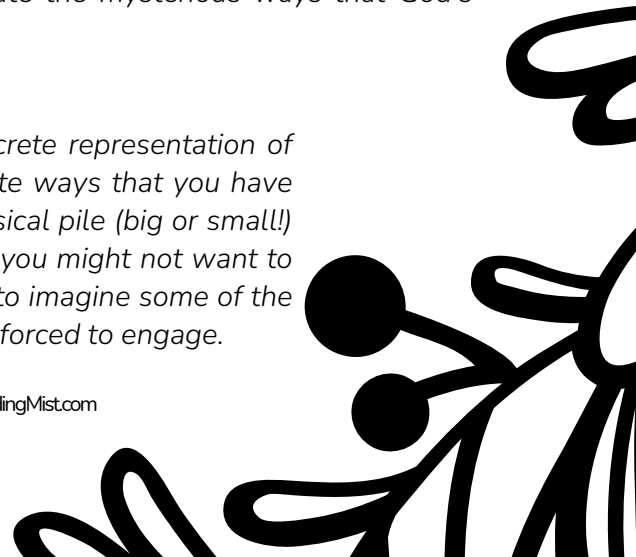
- 1: What surprised you about how you envision God apart from mercy?
  - Do you sense any shame or shoulds about 'correct theology' that you 'should' have here? Do all parts of you feel free to answer these kinds of questions honestly?
- 2: What did you notice when envisioning God as merciful?
  - What emotions or memories came to the surface as you imagined and drew this out? Do any parts of you feel forced to get on board with the 'correct Sunday school answer' that God is merciful? If so, what do you think these depths of your soul most need right now?

Spend 15-20+ minutes mindfully breathing and stretching, considering how God mercifully came in human form to be God with us, and how we are created in the likeness of God's mercy.

- As you breathe and stretch, consider the human aspects of your embodied being and how God came to be with us in human form. Consider the mysterious, divine, and very human aspects of Mary's pregnancy with Christ and Christ's human form.
- Consider how our embodied beings are created in God's likeness. As you connect with yourself - God's creation - while breathing and stretching, contemplate the mysterious ways that God's mercy is interwoven in our embodied beings.

Set aside 10-15+ minutes to create a Mercy Mountain

- So long as it does not feel forced, consider creating a concrete representation of God's mercy in your life. Rip or cut pieces of paper and write ways that you have experienced or seen God's mercy. Combine them into a physical pile (big or small!) that all parts of you can see. Be mindful that some parts of you might not want to engage in this practice. Consider giving yourself permission to imagine some of the depths of your soul observing this practice rather than being forced to engage.





## 3rd Sunday of Advent



As we slow down today, I encourage you to place a hand over your heart and pause here with your eyes closed for a minute or two, noticing how you're settling in to this space. Consider how connected or disconnected you feel from the practices here. Are you longing to slow down more? Are you frustrated by the simple and slow prompts here? Do different parts of you have different perspectives on these things? Wherever you are, let yourself take some nice deep breaths, letting out some heavy sighs, and reflect on the questions below. Consider writing or drawing your raw reactions to each. Take a walk or chat with a friend to process further.

*pause • breathe in • and let out a heavy sigh*

**How is your embodied being feeling in the midst of life right now?** Regardless of whether or not you're pressing into practices to slow down, this is a busy and full time of year. How is the wear and tear of this busyness taking a toll on you? Is there tension or fatigue that you notice anywhere in your body? Is there anticipation or eagerness to get to Christmas, the last day of work, or a specific holiday event later this month?

**As we sit between the first two weeks and the last two weeks, what have you noticed behind you that informs how you're thinking about what's ahead?** Are there ways you'd like to continue a certain rhythm or practice you've been enjoying these last two weeks? Are there ways you'd like to try things differently or see them move in a new way?

**Are there any parts of you that you have been noticing these last two weeks that you're not quite sure what to do with?** Do you feel pressure to figure out the parts of you that you're noticing? Would it feel helpful to give yourself permission not to have everything processed/figured out, but instead, be able to simply notice what pops up in reflections, handing everything else into God's care? For parts of you that feel weary about handing this over to God, would they open to letting God hold things for a short time to give them some reprieve?



## 3rd Week of Advent



*When they saw the star  
they were overjoyed (Matt 2:10)*

This week, we're going to consider and savor the incredible joy of the wise men. I promise we won't go into the Greek for too long here, it's just too rich in this verse to ignore completely...

A literal translation of this verse reads: *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with great joy exceedingly.* I love how the verse is so cluttered with language to describe their joy that you nearly trip over the words. While the Christmas season is often depicted as a bright season of special wonder and joy, the busyness of our lives often weighs us down from freely experiencing joy like this.

*Inhale . You are ... Exhale . our joy*

Read through these reflection questions to survey what we'll explore this week. Then, use the following page to piece together ways you'd like to process these questions throughout the week. Utilize the breathe prayer above at any point and/or throughout these practices this week.

**Do you notice any gut reactions to the breath prayer about joy?** Take a deep breath and notice anything happening in your body, like a feeling in you throat, chest, neck, or gut. Slow down to check in with any thoughts or emotions that are coming to the surface, even if you're not trying to think or feel these things. As you notice what's stirring inside, consider what this tells you about where you are right now and how your soul feels about focusing on joy.

**Are there any parts of you, any depths of your soul, that feel separated from joy, or as though they don't have permission to be joyful?** A thought like, "Sure, we're to rejoice in all circumstances, but right now there's just no joy" or "I don't deserve or am not allowed to express joy right now because \_\_\_\_\_." Is there any part of you that can resonate with thoughts like these? If so, what's the perspective of this part of you like? What is the perspective or the reasoning of this part of you for feeling this way? Rather than trying to argue with a perspective or part, consider taking a breath and simply noticing how this part of you sees the world, including God, others, and yourself. With curiosity, see what it's like to tune in with how this part of you sees the world, offering empathy rather than judgement for any possible 'bad theology.' Consider how Christ's tenderness might come alongside this part of you with compassion, and how this might be different from what you've experienced in human relationships that lacked mercy or empathy.



# Great Joy

Consider slowly processing the questions and reflections from the previous page throughout this week through the activities below. Feel free to adapt practices from previous weeks as well.

Spend 5-10+ minutes sitting in silence.

- *As you let all of you settle, place both of your hands over your heart and take a deep breath. As you exhale, without forcing yourself, see what it's like to let yourself smile and press into joy. Let any and all parts of you consider things that bring you joy -- this might be people, furry friends, places, gifts, trips, memories, music, art, dance, food, or anything else that comes to mind.*
- *Imagine giving permission to any hurting or grieving parts of you to engage or simply observe your interactions with joy. Without pressuring them, imagine inviting these parts of you to partake in any joy that you are feeling.*
- *As you contemplate this pure and simple experience of joy, consider moving your body in ways that match this expression (e.g., stretching your arms out in excitement, dancing, rocking back and forth, jumping up and down, or any other movement that you connect with joy).*

Spend 15-20+ minutes mindfully breathing and stretching, considering how joy fits in with the themes of the first two weeks of our Advent journey.

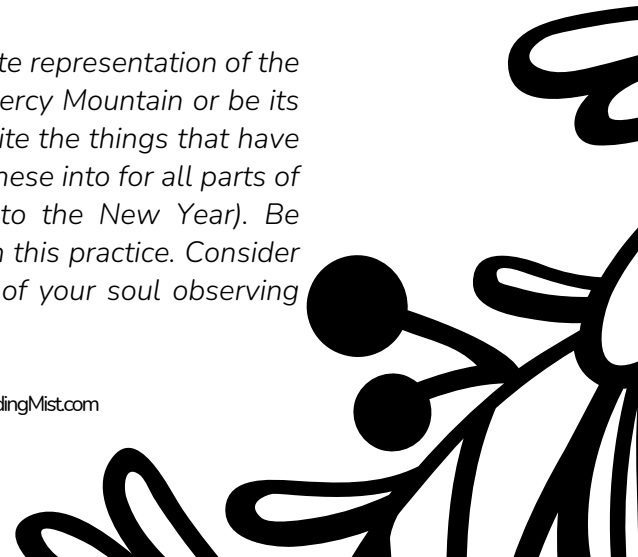
- *As you breathe and stretch, consider the ways you experience any mysterious intersection with God's mercy when you experience joy.*
- *Consider how experiencing joy intersects with your relationship with Immanuel -- God with us.*
- *Explore asking God to breath life and joy into your being. Be curious to notice if any parts of you are eager to pray a prayer like this, and/or if any parts of you are hesitant to pray a prayer like this.*

Explore joyful movements and delight:

- *See what it's like to let yourself walk in a way that connects with the joy you've been experiencing. This might look like getting connected with an 'inner child' or younger part of yourself that used to love to walk in the woods or skip down the street. Maybe instead of a walk you put on fun Christmas music and let yourself dance around the house being as silly and free as a small child. Maybe you watch a funny Christmas movie and come to life as you laugh.*
- *Invite all parts of you to dip their toe into some expression of joy and laughter, respecting if any parts of you would prefer not to do so right now.*

Set aside 5-10+ minutes to start a Joy Jar

- *So long as it does not feel forced, consider creating a concrete representation of the joys you encounter in your life. This can merge with your Mercy Mountain or be its own separate experience. Rip or cut pieces of paper and write the things that have been sparks of joy in your life. Find a jar that you can place these into for all parts of you to see grow each week (consider continuing this into the New Year). Be mindful that some parts of you might not want to engage in this practice. Consider giving yourself permission to imagine some of the depths of your soul observing this practice rather than being forced to engage.*





# 4th Sunday of Advent

Here we are -- most of December is now behind us with Christmas Eve and Christmas just before us. Wherever you are, let yourself take some nice deep breaths, letting out some heavy sighs, and reflect on the questions below. I encourage you to take some extra time slowing down today, knowing it will be our last Sunday of the season. Maybe you let yourself sit in silence for five or ten minutes today before you continue reading below. Whenever you read on, consider writing or drawing your raw reactions to each of the questions. Take a walk or chat with a friend to process further.

*pause • breathe in • and let out a heavy sigh*

**What is the state of your soul as you slow down today?** Another way to ask this is simply, *how is it with your soul?* Whatever you notice for this and the following questions, take a nice deep breath and notice this with curiosity. If any voices or perspectives of self-criticism or shame pop up, kindly ask this part of you to take a step back to give you some space to breath and anchor in.

**As we've done before, you can consider the state of your nervous system as you enter the week -- are you feeling calm/peaceful/safe/relaxed, stressed/anxious/frustrated/tired, and/or overwhelmed/paralyzed/hopeless/shut down?** Do you sense that different parts of you would have different answers to these questions?

**Are there ways that you notice the state of your nervous system being intertwined with the state of our soul?** e.g., are you feeling exhausted or beyond overwhelm, as though your soul is numb or shut down? Whatever you are experiencing, do you feel content or frustrated with the state of your nervous system and the state of your soul?



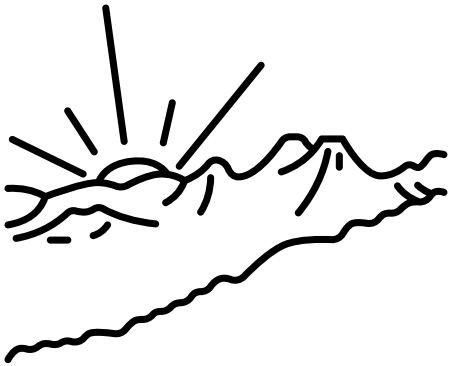


## 4th Week of Advent



*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

*(Isaiah 9:2; cf. Matt 4:16)*



Jesus quotes these words from the prophet Isaiah at the very beginning of His ministry. Beyond words, we can see a depiction of what we're anticipating and celebrating in Advent -- the dawning of a great light that shines into deep darkness. This week we'll consider how this imagery might resonate for the depths of our souls that feel stuck in deep darkness.

*Inhale . You are ... Exhale . our light*

Read through these reflection questions to survey what we'll explore this week. Then, use the following page to piece together ways you'd like to process these questions throughout the week. Utilize the breathe prayer above at any point and/or throughout these practices this week.

**Do you notice any gut reactions to the verse about light and deep darkness?** Take a deep breath and notice anything happening in your body, like a feeling in your throat, chest, neck, or gut. Slow down to check in with any thoughts or emotions that are coming to the surface, even if you're not trying to think or feel these things. As you notice what's stirring inside, consider what this tells you about where you are right now and how your soul feels about focusing on deep darkness and light.

**Are there any parts of you, any depths of your soul, that feel hopeful or hopeless when reflecting on a verse like this?** Maybe there's a thought like, "Yes, I know the right answer is that God is light and we're no longer in darkness, but I'm in a dark night of the soul right now and all I see is darkness, I can't find any light no matter how hard I try" or "I want to step into light, but it's too painful" or "if people saw me in this light, or this part of me in the light, they'd leave." Is there any part of you that can resonate with thoughts like these? If so, what's the perspective of this part of you like? With curiosity, see what it's like to tune in with how this part of you sees the world, offering empathy rather than judgement for any possible 'bad theology.' Consider how Christ's tenderness might come alongside this part of you with compassion, and how this might be different from what you've experienced in human relationships that lacked mercy or empathy.



# Great Light

Consider slowly processing the questions and reflections from the previous page throughout this week through the activities below. Feel free to adapt practices from previous weeks as well.

Set aside 15-20+ minutes to draw a depiction of deep darkness and light.

- Consider drawing how you envision any of the depths of your soul that are in darkness, and/or that have God's light reaching them in this Advent season.
  - e.g., you might draw a valley, pit, or well with little stick figures that represent hurting, hidden, or shamed parts of you that have felt as though they're living in darkness.
  - e.g., you might draw large and bright streams of light that are reaching or embracing these depths of your soul, along with any other imagery that represents the light of Christ bringing life, hope, and joy to the landscape of your soul.
- If you are experiencing barriers or a sense of stuckness, consider drawing the state of your soul in its most raw form, seeing if it feels authentic to draw Christ with you in the midst of the depths with these facets of your soul, or a depiction of God's mercy embracing you.

Spend 10-15+ minutes exploring the perspectives of the depths of your soul.

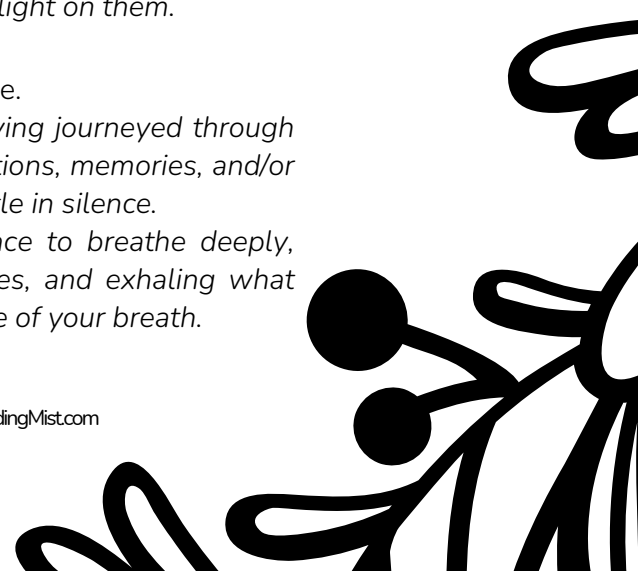
- As you look at what you have drawn, consider how deep darkness and/or light impact the embodied perspectives that the depths of your soul hold.
  - e.g., in deep darkness, how do parts of you see others, yourself, and God? What's the state of your soul in this place?
  - e.g., in the warmth of God's light, how do parts of you see others, yourself, and God? What's the state of your soul in this place?

Spend 10-15+ minutes exploring experiential movement of darkness and light.

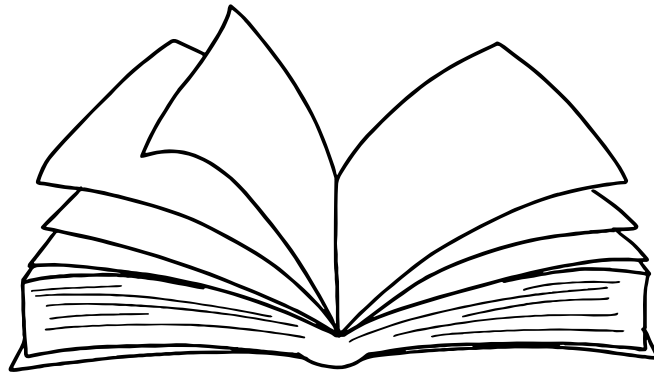
- This might be as simple as spending time in a dark room, laying flat on your back or curling up into a ball to explore what darkness feels like. Or to explore what light feels like, you might enjoy some expansive full-body stretches by a bright window or take a walk in the sunshine.
- Be curious to notice how different parts of you experience these movements. See how the darkness-experiences might bring up grief or empathy for hurting parts of you. Consider asking God to help the depths of you know that Immanuel is God with them as well. See if any of these parts of you might want to join you in the light-experiences. If you feel stuck, consider asking God to tenderly carry these parts of you into the light, or to shine light on them.

Spend 5-10+ minutes walking in silence, letting the season settle.

- Create space for the facets of your being to settle after having journeyed through Advent in this unique way. Gently notice the thoughts, emotions, memories, and/or body sensations that pop up or shift in some way as you settle in silence.
- Consider ending your walk sitting in silence, creating space to breathe deeply, inhaling what you'd like to take with you from these pages, and exhaling what you'd like to leave behind. Consider praying with the cadence of your breath.



# The next chapter.



Thank you so much for journeying with me through these pages! I hope this unique integrative Advent journey has been a blessing to all the depths of your soul. If you're wondering how you might continue to slow down as you end the year and start a new one, consider the following practices:

- Pick out your 3-5 favorite ways that you slowed down during this Advent season. Consider rotating through these in a weekly rhythm. e.g., on Monday or Tuesday, you engage in one practice, and in the middle or end of the week, you engage in one or two others. Maybe you have one that you specifically enjoy for the weekend. Give yourself freedom and permission to experiment with finding a rhythm that works for you, knowing it's ok if you don't have this figured out in the beginning of January!
- Start your day with 5-10 minutes of stillness, breathing and stretching, or walking.
- Go on a walk or get coffee with a friend to collaborate together on how you might engage in practices like these side-by-side, encouraging each other and journeying alongside each other.

Wherever your New Year takes you, I hope all the depths of your embodied being know they are welcome to anchor in the sweetness of God's mercy, joy, and light.

*A. C. Grace*

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