



Comfort & Joy

LIVING THE LITURGY
DURING THE
ADVENT SEASON

ELIZABETH FOSS

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DURING THE
ADVENT SEASON

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This one is for Kristin,
without whom it quite literally never
would have happened and for whom
every word was intended.



And it's for Lucy,
who brings light to our days and
gives me reason to keep
writing our memories.
And for Lilly, who is already
giving meaning and beauty to
the second edition.

Table of Contents



PREPARING FOR ADVENT

Intro | Page 7

Late November | Happy Thanksgiving | Page 8

Late November | Welcome to Comfort & Joy | Page 11

Late November | Joy Journal {Seamless Joy} | Page 15

LIGHT ONE CANDLE FOR HOPE

Late November | What's Your Vision? {Seamless Joy} | Page 20

Late November | One Quiet Moment with God | Page 23

1 December | Intentional Traditions | Page 27

2 December | Christmas Trees and Glad Tidings | Page 32

3 December | A Dad at Christmas | Page 36

4 December | Celebrating the Feast of St. Barbara | Page 40

5 December | Giving up on Being Perfect | Page 43

LIGHT ONE CANDLE FOR PEACE

6 December | Breath of Heaven | Page 45

7 December | Light One Candle for Peace | Page 49

8 December | Immaculate Conception Novena Candle | Page 52

9 December | Entertaining Angels | Page 59

10 December | The Trap of Self-Rejection | Page 62

11 December | Say Yes | Page 65

12 December | The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe | Page 68

13 December | Saint Lucy | Page 70

14 December | On the Feast of St. John of the Cross | Page 73

LIGHT ONE CANDLE FOR JOY

15 December | Keep it Simple, Sweetheart | Page 75

16 December | Helping Children be Merry | Page 78

17 December | Advent Anew | Page 82

18 December | A Carriage Ride with God | Page 85

19 December | Love Languages of Advent | Page 87

20 December | Quick! Lock the Door! | Page 91

21 December | The Light is on for You | Page 93

LIGHT ONE CANDLE FOR LOVE

22 December | Through Her Eyes: Christmas Gift | Page 95

23 December | Grief | Page 98

24 December | Reflect Upon the Coming Joy | Page 102

25 December | Christmas Day | Page 105

26 December | On the Feast of St. Stephen | Page 106

27 December | Home: It's worth it | Page 108

28 December | We Miss the Baby in the Manger | Page 110

29 December | Feast of the Holy Family | Page 112

30 December | Eucharisteo | Page 116

31 December | Dipping and Dancing on New Year's Eve | Page 120

TRADITIONS, TUTORIALS, RECIPES AND GIFTS

TRADITIONS & TUTORIALS

Antipasto Plate Tutorial | Page 127

Liturgical Mantel Letters | Page 130

Poinsettia Flower Fairies | Page 132

HOMEMADE GIFTS

Christmas Jam | Page 135

Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Quick Bread in a Jar | Page 136

RECIPES

Peppermint Day | Page 138

Peppermint Hot Chocolate | Page 139

Mexican Hot Chocolate | Page 139

Peppermint Bark | Page 140

Homemade Peppermint Marshmallows | Page 141

Peppermint Chocolate Cookies | Page 142

Dipped Peanut Butter Balls | Page 143

Pretzel Dots | Page 144

RECIPES FOR A SIMPLE CHRISTMAS MORNING

Hashbrown Casserole | Page 146

College Boys' Favorite French Toast | Page 147



Baby Jesus,

We open the pages of this book with great anticipation. Advent! The time of great hope is here! For hundreds of years before You were born in a humble stable, the great promise of You was prophesied. We celebrate the fulfillment of those prophecies, even as we remember them anew. We celebrate Your birth, dear, sweet Lord, even as we wait in joyful hope for your second coming.

We know that Advent is a time of hope in the Church. We are reminded that the Lord's first coming was prophesied hundreds of years before He was born. God incarnate slept in a manger, surrounded by great hope at the first Christmas. We will spend this Advent celebrating Christ's first coming, as well as remaining hopeful for His Second Glorious Coming.

Please, Lord grant to us a peaceful Advent. Let us prepare for Christmas with lovely works of our hands and even lovelier spirits attuned to You. Grant us grace, good and gracious God, to do your will today and throughout this season with glad and grateful hearts.

Introduction

Before you begin:

In an effort to curate our family's celebration of Advent and Christmastide and to offer you some earnest encouragement as you walk the journey to Bethlehem, we've endeavored to gather the goodness and offer you something every day.

We begin with those late November days and take you all the way to December 31. Because the dates change every year, we've left waning November days loose and undated. The first day of Advent varies, and so it's difficult to date here. But please don't skip these December days. Adapt them to the liturgical calendar this years.

You will find a short one page devotional that gives you something to ponder, a prayer to utter, and a meaningful but simple action item. After that, there is an essay. Some are classic essays from Christmases past. Some are new essays. Some share our traditions for the day. Others offer a wee bit of advice. Beginning December 1, there are dates.

The appendix is filled with family recipes and helpful planning pages. I urge you to look at the planning calendar. There, you will find reminders to begin to pray certain novenas and you can get a glance of what comes next and jump ahead a bit to prepare. For instance, we have a simple candle craft for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception Novena. You'll find it on December 8 because that's the day of the feast. But you need to do the craft and begin the novena on November 29. You'll see the reminder to do so on the planning calendar.

There's so much here. Please remember as you read that this volume contains nearly thirty years of our family's memories and traditions. While it is by no means a comprehensive "How to do Catholic Advent the Right Way" book and it doesn't pretend to be, it is an awful lot of stuff! So don't even think about doing it all. Just prayerfully sift and keep what works for your family.

Join us on Facebook at the Living the Liturgy: Comfort and Joy group so that we can encourage one another. If you share pictures of your celebrations, please hashtag them #livingtheliturgy so that we can see how the same idea looks very different in every home.

Finally, please know I'm praying for you! I'm very grateful for the trust you put in me when you purchased this book. I promise to honor that trust this season.

Grace to you,





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Get on as Well as Possible**



THINK

"The best way that a man could test his readiness to encounter the common variety of mankind would be to climb down a chimney into any house at random, and get on as well as possible with the people inside. And that is essentially what each one of us did on the day that he was born."

-- G K Chesterton

Happy Thanksgiving! Will these days be a test? Will you need to work a little to get along with folks under the holiday roof? God grants us grace for this.

Ask Him for an extra serving, please.

PRAY

Dear Lord, you have blessed us with family and you have granted us opportunities to learn to live in community. As we gather to celebrate the abundance of your graces, please help us to be ever aware of how much we love each other. Show us yourself in our brothers. Grant to us more patience and more lovingkindness so that we may bless and bless and bless today.

ACT

Get outside. Get out this morning and walk or run or bike. Push a stroller.

Hold a hand (big or small. Bundle up if necessary.

Whatever it takes, get outside and inhale God in nature.

Repeat again after dinner.



Thanksgiving Weekend



Here we are. It's Thanksgiving. That date on the calendar bring smiles to many people. They look forward with fond anticipation to the official beginning of a season of warmth and togetherness. They embrace the hustle and bustle and they embrace all the friends and family who come together. There is nary a hitch in their step and never a cross word spoken over flour-dusted rolling pins. Life looks like a Norman Rockwell painting from the last week in November until the first week in January. All is calm and bright.

I have never met one of those people.

Instead, most people approach the season with at least a little trepidation. This is not going to be easy. There will be difficult situations to navigate. For many of us, there are money pressures. Those big meals and that company will stretch and stress the food budget. More than once, I will call to mind the miracle of loaves and fishes and ask God to multiply the bounty in our kitchen. The gift list will cause us to lose sleep. Is it too much? Is it enough? How shall we fund it? Where do we draw the lines to include festive generosity and exclude spoiled materialism? There is much to ponder there.

Money pressures aside (oh, but that we could brush them easily aside), these days of calm and bright often bring relationship tension. G. K. Chesterton wrote, "The best way that a man could test his readiness to encounter the common variety of mankind would be to climb down a chimney into any house at random, and get on as well as possible with the people inside. And that is essentially what each one of us did on the day that he was born." And we do it again, when we walk through the door to an extended family holiday gathering. Quite the variety gathers there. In the early days of a growing family, a new parent is just getting used to his or her role in ordinary every day life and WHAM! Thanksgiving happens and all the carefully laid rules and routines and roles are thrown into confusion. The middle-aged mother has to learn that her child is now a parent. The now-grown child has to hold his tongue when his grandfather—now a great-grandfather-- offers old-fashioned, if well seasoned, advice. We all stretch and groan and strain a bit, even as we know that this is how it is meant to be: one generation after another, teaching in love.

The college kids come home. They expect to enter into a house that is exactly as they left it and they are surprised and maybe even horrified to find that time did not stand still. People grew. Roles shifted every so slightly, but very significantly. There will be jostling. And even as they think that all should be as it was when they left, they are eager to show how much they've changed—

how grown they are, how independent. They've forgotten how this family hinges on service of one to another. They've forgotten the well-established rhythms of the household, the rhythms that are the scaffolding of peace.

We take a deep breath and understand that a holiday means we have to work a little (or maybe a lot) to get along with everyone under the roof. God will grant us the grace we need; we just might have to ask for an extra serving, please. Once we've asked for His good grace, we have to look to extend it to those nearest to us. The secret to being successful in these situations is reminding oneself that most of us are doing the very best we can and all of us carry our own crosses into the day.

The Lord blesses us with families and grants us opportunities to learn to live in community. As we gather to celebrate the abundance of His blessings, we ask Him to help us be ever aware of how much we love each other. We ask to see Him in our brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles. The family is under such strain in modern society, we have to make a concerted effort to build it up from within. We need Christ's example of brotherly love more than ever.

G. K. Chesterton wrote a generation ago, "The modern writers who have suggested, in a more or less open manner, that the family is a bad institution, have generally confined themselves to suggesting, with much sharpness, bitterness, or pathos, that perhaps the family is not always very congenial. Of course the family is a good institution because it is uncongenial. It is wholesome precisely because it contains so many divergencies and varieties. It is, as the sentimentalists say, like a little kingdom, and, like most other little kingdoms, is generally in a state of something resembling anarchy." Sometimes, in my quest for congeniality, I miss the richness that is the tapestry God has woven into my family. Both in my nuclear family and in my extended family, there is so much variation and there are so many different personalities. It's astonishing, really, how complex we all are. The complexities alarm me. I seek to vanquish conflict. And I feel defeated when conflict arises. I try to smooth the irregularities that give a complex texture to the fabric of our family life. There's a place for the peacemaker, to be sure. No one likes a holiday brawl. But there is room at the table for disagreement and discussion. There is room for the richness that comes with conflicting points of view.

Further, it is my dearest hope that there be room and time and tenderness enough to heal wounds and to bind the pain of raw memories. When we recognize that this is the chimney through which God pushed us into a community, these are the people He chose to teach us how to live, we can begin to see that even the hardest moments and the most difficult people can be used by Him to shape us for the good. Holidays, for all their hype and hysteria might be best suited to heal.





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Be Lifegiving First to Those Under our Own Roofs**



THINK

"The great danger for family life, in the midst of any society whose idols are pleasure, comfort and independence, lies in the fact that people close their hearts and become selfish."

--St. John Paul the Great

PRAY

Open my heart wide, God—wide to the people who need to be nurtured and loved and comforted. Let me be your hands and feet this very day and let me wrap someone with your Love.

ACT

Openness to life—the entire pro-life movement—begins in the home. We are called to be lifegiving first to those under our own roofs. In every family, there is one member who is needier than the rest. It is likely that this is a different person in different seasons. Who is the person in your family this year for whom the holidays will be stressful? Who is the person most in need of the respite that comes with being at peace at home? What one selfless thing can you do for that person today that will bring comfort and peace to him or her?



Welcome to Comfort & Joy

Welcome!

Come in and sit a bit. Take off your shoes and curl your feet under you on the couch; this is not a formal affair. What you will find on these pages is not a comprehensive manual that dictates how to “do Advent.” It is not written by an Advent expert (is there truly such a person?). Instead, you hold in your hands the musings of a young mother, the memories of a growing family, and a wee bit of wisdom learned over the course of more than a quarter century. With this volume, I share our stories and our recipes and a few of our struggles. I let you peek into our traditions and offer you the opportunity to shape them into you into ones of your own.

Don't try to do everything this year. Don't even try to do everything at all. Some of the traditions here might not suit your family. No doubt you have some of your own special things you want to do every year. Don't let mine crowd out yours.

Maybe don't do any of them at all.

Maybe just read the essays and let them inspire something else in you, something better. Let my stories encourage you and let me empathize with your struggles. I'd be honored if you'd give me a moment of your precious quiet time each day to offer you a little grace with your morning tea.

Advent is a treasured time of year for our family and our traditions are both old and new. From the time my oldest son was a very little boy (about 27 years ago), picture books have been the pegs upon which we've hung our Advent celebrations. Those baskets of books have grown through the years and now, my littlest girl, just turned seven, listens to the same stories and celebrates with many of the same traditions.

I used to think I could just add Advent to our regular routine. Now I know that living Advent all day, every day, suits our family best. Over the years I've written several homeschool lesson plans, incorporating typical school subjects with our every day Advent life. And every year, our traditions change just a little bit as our family changes. Honestly, I wish that I could cultivate the habit of living fully immersed in the liturgical year all year long. I love the way we “do” Advent.

We usually begin our Advent celebrations the first weekend after Thanksgiving. We bring out the Advent wreath and other reminders that this is the season to prepare. Purple [letters propped on the mantel](#) are visual reminders that it is a season of getting ready—it's not yet Christmas. I always resolve to make sure that the Advent wreath is lit each night, which is really my resolution not to let Christmas preparations get so crazy that we don't make time for quiet family meals. Some years I meet that goal better than I do in other years.

Thanksgiving weekend is also the time our children choose their Advent Angels. Drawing from a hat, each child (even the ones who are now adults), chooses the name of a sibling. They are to encourage that person throughout Advent and on Christmas, they present them with a gift.

Around December first, we trim our tree, placing it in a front window to light the evening and bear witness to our waiting. We also begin our Jesse Tree devotions. We also place several manger scenes around the house. There is a little bit of a war in our house about whether baby Jesus should be in the manger or whether he should be hidden until Christmas Eve. Some of the children think that He should be hidden since we're waiting. But the wee ones want to re-enact the nativity again and again, so they need the Baby. My compromise is to ensure that the scenes which are safe for playing hands have Jesus to hold all through Advent.

The patron saint of architects is [St. Barbara](#). When we celebrate her feast on December 4, we seize the opportunity to build our own gingerbread houses. We usually start with a purchased kit, but we encourage innovation 'round here and gingerbread decorating never fails to become quite the competition. The [Jan Brett books](#) come out around this time. While most are not overtly spiritual, they are beautifully illustrated stories from varied cultures and they add a dimension to our Advent reading that is both visually delightful and prosaically whimsical.

On December 6th, we read [The Miracle of St. Nicholas](#) and [The Baker's Dozen](#). The children are treated to stuffed stockings in the morning and we begin cookie baking that day. Clearly, my children understand that Santa Claus is a legend that began with a real man who served the poor. Because our stockings come early, they aren't filled by Santa. They each will find, among other things, an ornament in their stockings. When they are grown and have Christmas trees of their own, their ornaments will go with them.

On [December 12th](#), we read [The Lady of Guadalupe](#) and enjoy [Mexican hot chocolate](#). We share a traditional blessing with one another: May God be as good to you as He was to Juan Diego. Then, we usually have tacos for dinner.

My children love the Feast of St. Lucia, on [December 13th](#). We read [Hanna's Christmas](#), a darling little story about a Swedish girl who is homesick in America. We talk about St. Lucy and we think it's pretty cool that she's an Italian saint who is beloved by Scandinavian countries. Since I am Italian and my husband is Scandinavian, she's the perfect saint for our family! The girls awaken early and dress and make cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate for all the men in the house. They wear fabric crowns of holly and candles and delight in serving breakfast in bed. Because St. Lucy is the patron of light, that evening is the perfect one to drive around the neighborhood and admire Christmas lights. [Lucia, Saint of Light](#) is the preferred evening reading.

On [December 17th](#), we begin to sing the O Antiphons. You might recognize them in the verses of *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. My children know that Christmas is close indeed when we get our little Antiphon house out and begin to fill the rooms with golden cubes. Each Antiphon begins with "O" and addresses Jesus with a unique title which comes from the prophecies and whose initials, when read backwards, form an acrostic for the Latin "Ero Cras" which means "Tomorrow I come."

For some reason I cannot remember, this is also time for [Peppermint Day](#). We make peppermint marshmallows and peppermint cocoa, peppermint bark and peppermint crackle cookies. We read [The Legend of the Candy Cane](#). And we begin to get really ready for the twelve days of Christmas which will begin on the 25th.

Our Christmas celebration begins on [Christmas Eve](#). Traditionally, my husband has taken my children to the wharf to buy seafood for our feast. My grandmother used to do this when I was a child. While I have scaled down the traditional Italian Christmas Eve of seven fishes, I do still cook whatever ocean treasures they find and bring home. We go to Mass as a family and come home to open presents. Then, my children sleep well and linger long in their pajamas Christmas morning. The celebration has just begun.

We extend our celebrating through the Feast of Epiphany, stopping to observe [St. Stephen's Day](#) and [the Feast of the Holy Family](#), and [the Feast of the Holy Innocents](#) along the way.

The season is a rich one, steeped in traditional feasts and spiced with our own innovative adaptations. It's also a busy one and stressful one. Some of my most anxious moments have been Advent moments. I've shared those with you, too.

But before you read another word, I invite you to listen. Advent is a challenging season for most women I know. It demands a lot of our time and attention and we can quickly become burned out. I've recorded a 45 minute podcast for you to listen to before you plan one single thing. *I want this Advent to be about you.* Of course it is about Jesus. Of course it is about the family you serve. But I want to encourage you to make this Advent one where your heart doesn't get forgotten. I want it to be the Advent when you don't sacrifice basic self-care for everything else. I want you to pour yourself one cup of grace after another. Let this be your Advent of earnest prayer and let this Christmas find you ever so ready to welcome the infant into yourself. Listen first. Then, make the book your personal tool.

[Download Comfort and Joy Podcast in the ebook bundle](#)





#LivingtheLiturgy: Beautiful Friendship, Love of My Life



THINK

"For a moment Anne's heart fluttered queerly and for the first time her eyes faltered under Gilbert's gaze and a rosy flush stained the paleness of her face. It was as if a veil that had hung before her inner consciousness had been lifted, giving to her view a revelation of unsuspected feelings and realities. Perhaps, after all, romance did not come into one's life with pomp and blare, like a gay knight riding down; perhaps it crept to one's side like an old friend through quiet ways; perhaps it revealed itself in seeming prose, until some sudden shaft of illumination flung athwart its pages betrayed the rhythm and the music, perhaps. . . perhaps. . . love unfolded naturally out of a beautiful friendship, as a golden-hearted rose slipping from its green sheath. "

--L.M. Montgomery, Anne of Avonlea

My husband's birthday falls around Thanksgiving Weekend. I've known him since he was 14. Fifty seemed a long time off back then. There was no pomp and blare; I do not even remember meeting him. It's as if I've always known him. There were lots of quiet days and late night conversations. And then, one evening, I realized that my old friend was the love of my life. And here he is, a little grayer, so much wiser, loving me and our big family, love unfolding naturally every single day.

PRAY

God, thank you for my husband, for this dear friend with whom I live life and grow closer to you. Help me to meet him always with a gesture of kindness and genuine love. Today, especially, show me how to show him how very much I love him.

ACT

Date night? Even if it's to take a picnic of Thanksgiving leftovers and drive around and see who is together enough to already have Christmas lights lit. Think of some way, some how, to spend some time alone together in conversation. Nurture the beautiful friendship.



Joy Journal {Seamless Joy}

As Advent approaches, the binder is taken from the shelf. In it, I find lists, some handwritten, some printed in orderly type. There are gift lists, menus, shopping lists, to-do lists. All the ghosts of Christmas past. These lists are enormously helpful as I look ahead. I set them each out upon the counter and gaze upon the colorful quilt they make there. But I sigh with the longing. I long for the one-piece life my friend Ann Voskamp describes. Ann is an artist and a poet and she reminds me frequently that “I can live a one-piece life, an ordinary life that is wholly sacred, because the Holy Spirit resides within, this body now being the very house of God.”

But can I do it during Advent?

Yes, I think so, especially during Advent. In this holy season of hopeful anticipation, every thought can be captured as a prayer and every action intentionally ordered toward heaven. For a moment, it all seems so simple, and then, I open my eyes. I see the bright commercialism of “the holidays.” I can hear the tinny shrillness of “seasonal music” in the box store. I feel the crush of social expectations. It all makes me restless. Deep within, I want holy days, candlelight and sacred hymns.

My life feels patched together like a Christmas quilt. There are pieces that are completely secular. The office party, the neighborhood cookie exchange, and the soccer tournaments in the cold rain are all part of my seasonal celebrations. Then there are pieces that are Christian — bright reminders of the season in the Baptist school where my boys played basketball, post after post on inspirational Christian blogs.



Make your house fair as you are able.



Trim the Hearth

And finally, there are the pieces that are Catholic. Those speak most urgently to my soul: the feast days along the way, the rosy hue of Gaudete Sunday, the nativity sets that beg small fingers to relive the miracle again and again, the lingering smell of Bethlehem incense, the sacraments in the glorious basilica.

To live a seamless life, I must find the sacred in the secular, and I must be the sacred in the secular. Ann writes: "God intended it all, every breath, to be received as holy. For He bestowed each one. Do I dare take the gift for granted? All might be treated as hallowed, coming down from our Father of the heavenly lights. All might be seen as sacred, pregnant with the possibility of spiritual acts of worship (Ro. 12:1). God wove life to be seamless, a tunic like Jesus': one piece. For all is in Him. 'In God... we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). 'Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence' (Ps. 139:7).

"God is everywhere: He is the continuous thread, weaving the world and all that is within it together. 'For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.'"

In a seamless Advent, we really live the liturgy. Every breath is infused with sweet, holy incense. We see clearly that this is a time of waiting and prayer and fasting. We gaze upon the Blessed Mother, great with child, upon a humble donkey, protected by good St. Joseph, and we know that every moment truly is pregnant with the possibility of holiness. The Church teaches that: "[w]hen the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for His second coming. By celebrating [John the Baptist's] birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: 'He must increase, but I must decrease'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 524).

If my life is to be holy even as I walk among the secular, I must relinquish my every thought, word and deed to the will of God. What would He have me do at that party, in the cold rain on the sidelines, in the gym festooned with scripture verses, in the parish hall amidst sticky faces and donuts? What would He have me do in the quiet of the morning before the busy bustle of the day? What would He have me do as I shop and wrap? What would He have me do as I clean and cook and feed and clean again? How would He have me prepare for the infant God?

What could be more pleasing to God than to use these four weeks of Advent stitching together a seamless garment? How should I spend this precious gift of time?

I shall spend it weaving a one-piece life. I shall spend it learning to say with every moment, in all sincerity, "I seek not my own will, but the will of Him that sent me; for I do always the things that please Him" (Jn 8:29).

In addition to my regular homekeeping notebooks, I have a Christmas Control Journal. Many years ago, I downloaded the FlyLady's Control Journal for Christmas and put it in a binder. I photoshopped the cover of Susan Branch's Christmas book and made it say "Foss Family Christmas Planner." I put all our lists and recipes in it. I'm sure I did this, because I also made one for my friend Megan. This book is not a figment of my imagination. Would you like to see it?

Me too.

I can't find it. Not only that, the electronic version went "poof" when lightning struck my computer. This is proof positive for me of a theory I've long held to be true. [If you are a diehard FLYLady fan, please hold your rotten tomatoes.]:

There's no such thing as a control journal.

Anyone who thinks that she can put everything into a notebook and then have some "control" over her life needs to have a few more children. "Control" is an illusion. So, a Christmas Control Journal is a preposterous notion to me. I'm someone who has found the car keys in the freezer because a teenager put them there. I've spent the night before hosting a huge Thanksgiving weekend party in the ER because my baby wheezes. I've lost all my Christmas money the month before Christmas because I was postpartum and sleep deprived and distracted when I hid the carefully saved cash. I'm someone who invested hours into making a control journal. And then lost it. I don't even hold the illusion of control any more. God is laughing at my lost control journal. And He's showing me--day by day--that He is in control and I'm supposed to be looking to Him and not to a management scheme.

That said, I worked diligently at the Christmas portion of my homekeeping notebook. Semantics, you say? Not at all. First of all, I can't remember anything. I need to write it down, log it into the computer, blog it, take pictures, back it all up. Then, I need to know that it's not going to look like it does on paper or inside this screen. Because something will happen; it always does. I'm going to make plans, but not plans for control, plans for Joy!

A Joy Journal is an opportunity to sit down and think about what's important in a family Christmas tradition and to deliberately set about making it happen, being careful not to miss the opportunities for serendipitous joy along the way and being careful not to let your blessings rob you of your joy. A Joy Journal is a tool towards an intentional Christmas. This isn't a "Control Journal;" it's a journey to the heart of Christmas Joy. This isn't a factory-driven management tool. Instead, it's gentle reminder to the heart of the home--it's a reminder to mothers to see Christ in Christmas all the time.

When I created my Christmas planner this year, I did it with my oldest daughter, Mary Beth and my daughter-in-love, Kristin. We talked about the practicality of all the things we need to remember and plan. Section by section, we considered what works in our family. Prayerfully, carefully, joyfully, we created a useful tool which will help us focus on the tasks at hand while fixing our gazes on the babe in the manger. A control journal is a task list in a vacuum. A Joy Journal is a dynamic, organic work of creative art that will reflect the soul of a family and adapt to meet its changing needs. I can clip from magazines, include novena reminders and prayer cards, add graphics, play with the font, and make it all pretty. I can invest some time and thought and reap the rewards of a considered Christmas. I can pray as I create it and pray as I use it. Here is my Joy Journal. It's all those things I want or need or intend to do. Some of them won't get done. Other things will creep in and I will prioritize in favor of them. Some of the dates will slide. No doubt, we'll have a few more visitors come through the revolving door. I know it will change every year, even if just a little. And when it's all finished, I'll make a color copy and mail it to a friend. Who will keep it safe. Just in case;-

Joy Journal

ADVENT
PLANNER
2015

As it did last year, it will flex and stretch and grow this year because I have a child who is a gifted athlete and these days are post-season tournament time. Then, as last year, he will have surgery to repair a serious injury. Shift it all over, scratch off, make room.. I'll be re-writing even as the plans keep changing.. A lot. Even still, some of it won't get done. Other things will creep in and I will prioritize in favor of them. some of the dates will slide. No doubt, we'll have a few more visitors come through the revolving door. Door's open!

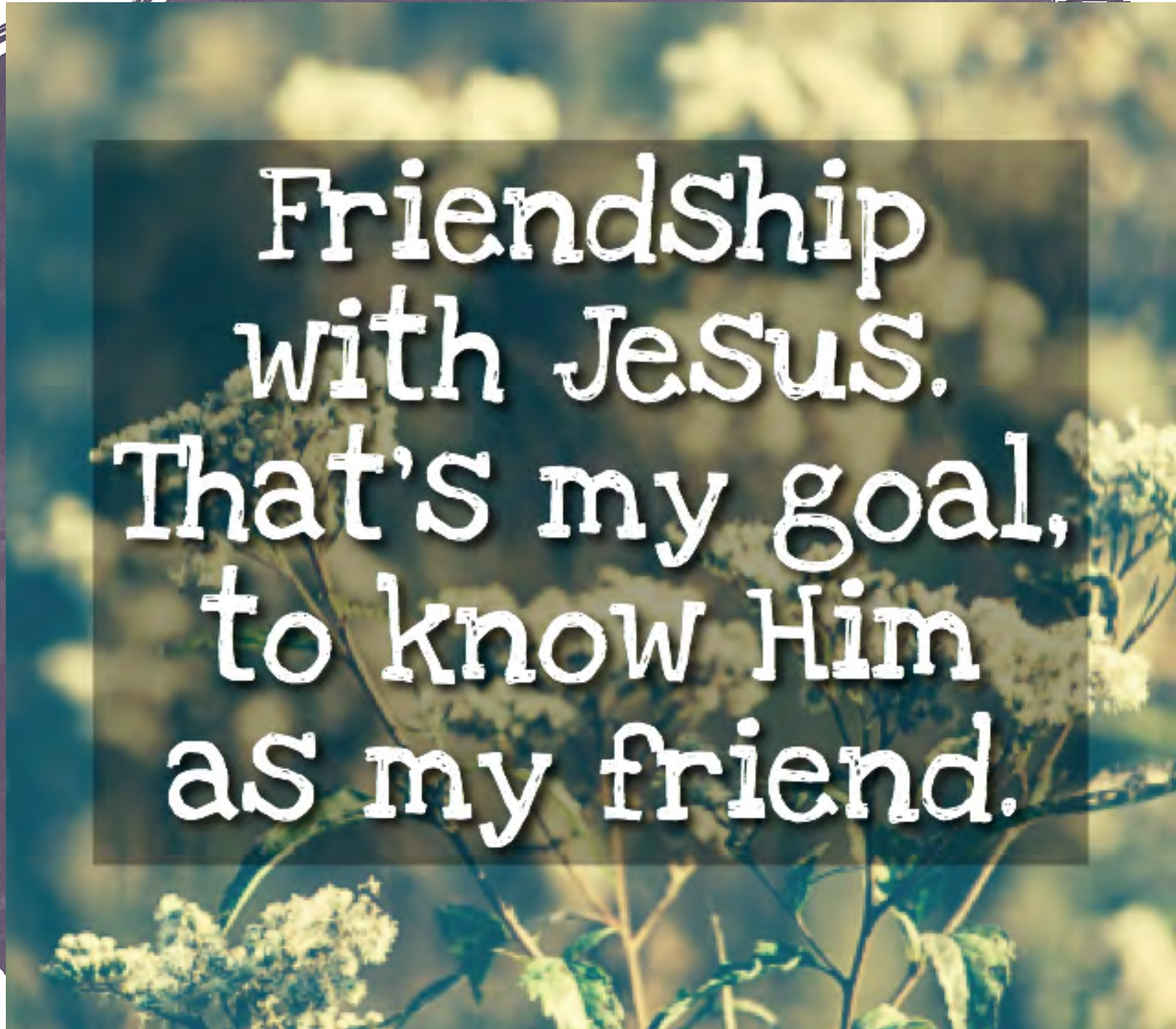
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#LivingtheLiturgy:

Make a Date with Jesus

A central graphic featuring a purple, scalloped-edged frame. Inside the frame is a photograph of white flowers with green leaves. Overlaid on the photo is the text "Friendship with Jesus. That's my goal, to know Him as my friend." in a white, serif font.

Friendship
with Jesus.
That's my goal,
to know Him
as my friend.



THINK

"Truly it is a blessed thing to love on earth as we hope to love in Heaven, and to begin that friendship here which is to endure for ever there." --St. Francis de Sales

Friendship with Jesus. That's my goal, to know Him as my friend. To live a holy friendship in step with him, to take him with me and share my life with Him. But mostly, to listen—to hear what He is whispering always in my ear.

PRAY

I am grateful Lord, for your patient friendship. There are times when I am painfully aware of how I've failed my friends here on earth and how, even more, I fall short of your glory. Make me a better friend—to them and to you.

ACT

Every friendship requires focused time alone. Friendship with Jesus is no exception. Make a date with God today. Will you meet in a coffee shop? Take a walk together? Sit quietly in a chapel? Curl up on your couch? He'll be there; invite Him and give Him a heaping dose of quality time.



What's Your Vision? {Seamless Joy}

I don't know why it catches me by surprise. It happens almost every year. The Sunday after Thanksgiving is the first Sunday of Advent. The commercial world is telling us that the Christmas season is upon us. It's not. But a sacred time of preparation awaits us, if only we prepare to prepare.

What will Advent hold for you this year? How will you draw nearer to the infant in the manger? How will you draw nearer to the child in your home? How will you prepare your home and your heart so that you can throw wide your doors and invite in the traveler? What's your vision?

The Church, in her wisdom, sets aside two seasons of the year for preparation. She invites us to contemplate, to pray, to seek the Lord and to purposefully prepare for the feasts that follow. Preparation is deliberate and thoughtful.

In stark contrast, the secular version of the days leading up to Christmas is one of hustle and bustle. And in the frenzied busyness, we lose our vision, if we ever had one at all. While Lent and Advent are but seasons in a year, all of childhood is a time of preparation. A child is born, after nine months of waiting, and we set about the very serious task of preparing him for adulthood. Is it a frenzied, busy rush to grow up or is it a purposeful, deliberate journey to spiritual and emotional adulthood? Look closely at the child in your life. What is important right now for his growth as a human being? What can you do with the next four weeks to foster a true sense of the sacred and to enable that child to truly experience the birth of the Savior in his heart?

So often, whether in December or in ordinary time, we get swept along by the culture. We spend carpooling time listening to the news on the radio or chatting on a cell phone, missing golden opportunities for conversation with our young passengers. We spend dinnertime pushing the revolving door as family members scatter to important activities. We spend evenings and weekends furthering a career because our work is important and vital to society and to our own sense of self. Childhood is so brief. And we let it pass without giving it serious thought. Without our pondering and praying and articulating a vision, we let our opportunity to shape souls slip by. Like the hustle and bustle of December, childhood takes on the rapid cadence of sports tournaments and dance practices, hurried mornings and frantic evenings, until one day, we collapse in an exhausted heap. We are surrounded --not by wrapped packages and lit trees on the morning of the feast -- but by caps and gowns, suitcases and traveling trunks. The child is leaving. Did you spend the time scurrying or did you spend it singing lullabies?

Will you spend Advent flitting from packages to parties or will you do something meaningful? In this brief space between Thanksgiving and Advent, take some time to pray. Take some time to plan and to prepare. How can this time be a purposeful journey as a family? What is really, eternally important in the life of your child?



Perhaps you will choose to do together some of the wonderful traditional Advent activities found on Pinterest. Or perhaps, you will simply sit quietly with your child, every night from now until Christmas, as he drifts off to sleep, listening to him and sharing your heart with him. Perhaps there is room for both. And when he's finally sleeping, you might linger a moment more and ask God to show you how to bring your child ever closer every day to the creche.

Pray for the blessings of a peace-filled Advent.





#LivingtheLiturgy:
I want to be an instrument for good



THINK

"In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting--any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others." --C. S. Lewis

A secret Master of Ceremonies? Wow. Do you look at your friends differently when you consider that God has chosen them for you? How amazing to consider that friendship is all about the God revealing to us the beauty within someone else. Are we receptive? Do we see?

PRAY

God, show me the beauty in the people with whom you have surrounded me. I want to see them as you do, as you created them to be. And God, I want to be an instrument for good in their lives.

ACT

Lattes are a love language. I have a local friend who is really, really good at reading my needs. She can take two hurried text messages and know that things are heading in a bad direction. But what comes next is even more extraordinary. She shows up. On her way to run errands or even out-of-her-way, she appears on my porch with a latte. And a bouquet of flowers. She turns the whole day around. And here's the thing: I had no idea that lattes and daisies are my love language. But apparently, they are. I feel loved every single time.

Speak another woman's love language today.



One Quiet Moment with God

Here we are on the eve of first weekday of Advent. It is New Year's in the Church — we begin anew the liturgical year. This is a good day for resolutions, though I suspect most of us are making to-do lists instead. Me, too. I have a December 20th goal. God willing, every important thing on the “do ahead” list will be finished that day. In our family, if it's not finished before Dec. 21 — the day our Nicholas celebrates his birthday — it's not going to be finished. That is the day the festivities begin.

How can I begin my Christmas celebration before the completion of Advent? How can I not? Fourteen years ago, I held that perfect baby after a perfect delivery and forevermore I knew that our celebration would begin early. We celebrate our very own Christmas miracle. Besides, have you ever tried to tell a little boy (or a big boy) to scale it down a little for his birthday because we're still in “preparation mode?”

So, there is a huge push towards the third week of Advent, a week the Church has devoted to joy. We begin slowly in the first week, breathing deeply of peace and reminding ourselves that Christ is peace and not a grand hullabaloo of fa-la-las. Then there is the week that is traditionally dedicated to hope. On the third Sunday, the pink candle is lit. And I am grateful for the reminder of the pink candle, lest I lose sight of the fact that these anticipatory chores are supposed to be undertaken with a spirit of quiet joy. With the “to-dos” safely finished, the last week of Advent's preparations are more likely to be interior. The frantic pace slows and we begin to look at the coming feast from the depths of our souls instead of from the frantic flashing of our digital organizing tool. At least that's the goal.

Today is the day we begin to say the traditional St. Andrew Christmas preparatory prayer. Fifteen times a day, every day, from now until Christmas—and it becomes woven into our spirits. This prayer truly is my favorite Christmas preparation. When I first began the tradition, it was mine alone. I said it by myself, quietly, late at night. Then, we began to say it as a family. The year I was on bedrest, I got the bright idea to research where to get medals and pretty purple beads and I made everyone chaplets so that the counting would be more efficient. Some families print little cards with the prayer on it and place them all over the house as reminders to say it; they don't say 15 all at once. Fifteen is not a magic number; there's no spell cast here. Instead, there is the gentle repetition of meditation, placing oneself squarely in the Gospel moment.



A beautiful, lyrical prayer, (sometimes prayed a bit hurriedly before succumbing to utter exhaustion at night) takes on a familiar, contemplative cadence as the weeks progress. We learn the prayer well and its message is begins to seep into our bones:

“Hail and blessed be the hour and moment in which the son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in the piercing cold. In that hour vouchsafe, O my God! To hear my prayer and grant my desires, through the merits of Our Savior Jesus Christ, and of His blessed Mother. Amen.”

This prayer and most novena prayers allow us to state our intentions, to beg for favors, to ask God to grant our desires. But I have noticed, as I have prayed the prayer, that in the time from the beginning of the devotion until the time near the completion, the focus shifts from the desire to the rest of the prayer. Over time, with repetition, my gaze is taken from what I want or think I need (however good and holy that might be) to who He is and how He lives in me.

This prayer is especially effective because it transports us from the frantic pace of merrymaking and busy planning ahead into one present moment with God. Just one. As we say the prayer, we are there, in that one holy hour and moment, hail and blessed, with Him and His beautiful, gentle mother. We are there marveling at the indescribable softness of the curve of a newborn cheek. We are there, beginning to understand what this baby means in our lives. And we are there, on bended knee, trying to comprehend the incomprehensible sacrifice that lies ahead for this humble, holy family.

And if we are there, we prepare our hearts for Him. We leave the busy “Martha” days of preparation and sit like Mary beside the holy crib. We hold a vigil familiar and precious to every mother as we watch and wonder at every stuttering, sighing, newborn breath. And the air is sweeter than we’ve ever known. Our hearts are filled with that quiet joy and our hands — once so busy with buying and baking and wrapping — are filled with Him.



Give this prayer a chance. And prepare for miracles. It will change you; I promise. Some years, the change is subtle and entirely interior and only God and I share the secret of what's happened in my soul. Some years, it's big and miraculous. One year, about five years ago or so, I told my friend Kristen that I was going to ask God to bless her family with another baby to adopt. And, I had my own petition, too: a good wife for Michael, my eldest son. Often in my household, this prayer gets said very late at night and somewhere in the fifteen sleepy repetitions things get all jumbled up. So, I frequently found myself praying a jumbled up "Please, God send Michael a good Kristen."

And He did.

*Hail and blessed be
the hour and moment in which
the Son of God was
born of the most pure Virgin Mary,
at midnight, in Bethlehem,
in piercing cold.
In that hour, vouchsafe,
O my God
to hear my prayer and
grant my desires, through the merits
of Our Saviour Jesus Christ,
and of His Blessed Mother.
Amen.*



**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Bethlehem is not the End of the Journey**



THINK

Advent is concerned with that very connection between memory and hope which is so necessary to man. Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope.

The purpose of the Church's year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart's memory so that it can discern the star of hope...

It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope.

--Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

PRAY

What a great gift hope is, Lord! How it fuels us, gives us a reason to put one foot in front of another, even when life throws hardship after hardship our way. Please God, this Advent, light a fire of hope inside of me. Let it burn brightly and warm my days with confident optimism. Dear God, open the doors of hope!

ACT

Sit with your children and sift through memories. Sort through printed pictures or scroll through digital ones. Take even a few moments to let those memories sink in, to see God's fingerprints all over them with the clarity that hindsight offers. Hope in the good God of Christmases past.



Intentional Traditions

Three years ago, we all celebrated a Christmas wedding on the weekend the Church dedicates to the Holy Family. For the record, I think that is the perfect weekend for a wedding.

And last year, we hung a new stocking, for Baby Lucy, the granddaughter we welcomed in the Easter season.

I love tradition. I love the comfort that comes with knowing everything will be the same year after year. Except nothing is really the same, is it? We weave pieces from past celebrations into the fabric of new celebrations.

My best Christmas childhood memory is of cooking with my grandmother on Christmas Eve. In that spirit, I cook an Italian feast of fish dishes on Christmas Eve today. It's the same; and it's very different. Traditionally, my husband has taken my children to the wharf in DC to buy seafood for our feast. My grandmother used to do this when I was a child. While I have scaled down the traditional Italian Christmas Eve of seven fishes, I do still cook whatever ocean treasures they find and bring home. Some years, we don't do the whole wharf adventure, and he takes them all to the "Seafood Show" at Costco instead. Still, he presents me with whatever he finds and we set about to make a feast of it. We used to go to the Children's Mass as a family and come home to open presents. Now, we go downtown to the Basilica for Midnight Mass. Then, my children sleep well and linger long in their pajamas Christmas morning. The celebration has just begun...

Let's talk a bit about traditions.

The trouble with traditions is they change. Who knew? People grow. Families change. What once seemed like it would always be that way, isn't. One time. And then it isn't the next time. And then, you know. It's never going to be the same again.



The thing about a Christmas wedding? Those little changes come in big waves all through Advent. And a mother knows it's all going to be very different, very soon. I've grown quite fond of stockings hung at the top of the stairs. The nine of them fill the space just perfectly and when I see them, I see a physical reminder of how abundantly blessed we are. Every time a baby was born, we added another stocking, with no small amount of glee. When Michael proposed to Kristin, I got her a stocking. I guess I just figured we were still adding to the family. I didn't consider logistics.

Logistics. How will this work, going forward? This December 6th tradition of stockings? Not so well. People won't be here on December 6th. One or more will be away at school, in the thick of exams, for the next forever many years. Too, they will move out altogether, with spouses and jobs and the impossibility to just be here in the morning on December 6th. Perhaps they will have their own children for whom to fill stockings.

The best traditions, it seems, must be open to change. And so, without further pondering on this particular reality in December of 2012, I hung the stockings--all nine together--one last time. I took a good picture (or at least I tried). And I pondered the memory of when we were still adding, whereupon me-at-40 and me-at-33 remind me-today of what it's all about.

First, from 2006:

It was an almost forgotten Advent tradition. The phone call to Land's End. I used to be a major catalog shopper, back before I was a major internet shopper. One year, I called Land's End and ordered three monogrammed stockings. Two years later, new baby at my breast, I called again. And then again. And again, every two years, until there were seven. Last year, I hung those stockings and thought with a twinge of sadness how perfectly they fit in the spot we'd chosen--no room for another. A month later, I was pregnant! So, this year, I ordered a stocking online for Karoline. But I ordered the one with the snowmen and not the angel. The girls learned of this mistake and protested loudly. Apparently, the family tradition is that the girls all have stockings with angels. I didn't know that two stockings made a tradition. Seemed like a nice tradition, though. So, it turned out that I had to make a phone call after all. And the very kind lady on the phone said, "A baby at Christmas! How lovely!" I kid you not--after a year of blogging loveliness permeating this pregnancy, she said "lovely." Lovely.



(Please note: I tucked that snowman stocking away. Five years later, I carefully removed every stitch of Karoline's name and then had it monogrammed: Kristin. God had a plan. God always has a plan.)

And the whole conversation with the Land's End lady reminded me of this column, written in 1999:

It was the weekend following Thanksgiving. My husband was traveling. I had nearly finished my Christmas shopping. And I had spent a couple of hours on the phone, bouncing back and forth between various members of my extended family; the first of several rounds of Christmas coordination calls. I was trying again to plan our Christmas celebrations, taking into account the visitation schedules of siblings and step-siblings. I was determined to have the perfect Christmas this year: everyone together to celebrate (except those who wouldn't be civil to each other) and a revival of some fond traditions of childhood Christmases (without stepping on the toes of people who have found new spiritualities). In my mind, all these criteria could be met. This could be perfect. I hung up after round one, my head and neck tense, my soul weary. It didn't feel remotely like Christmas and I had serious doubts that it would this year. I had one more call to make before I would call it a day. I needed to order a stocking for Stephen's first Christmas.

All my children have monogrammed needlepoint stockings and he would too. I called the catalog company and placed my order. "And I want to have it monogrammed," I said. "What should it say?" inquired the calm voice on the other end. "Stephen," I replied, tears springing unexpectedly to my eyes. "A baby at Christmas," she said. "That's what it's all about isn't it?" Stephen was born in early February that year and I'd spent the year letting him teach me all the ways that God is bigger. He is bigger than any plan I have and He is bigger than worry or anxiety. I am a planner and God has shown me this year that only His plans are the perfect ones. Thoughts of Stephen at Christmas brought thoughts of another Christmas baby.

I am quite sure that Christ's birth wasn't exactly the perfect Christmas Mary planned. I cannot even imagine a donkey ride nine months pregnant, in the throes of early labor. Caves full of animals stink. Hay makes me sneeze; I wonder if at least one person gathered on that night wasn't wheezing. And in the tired, hazy, sweet hours after childbirth, when most women want to rest and just gaze at the fruit of their labor, the holiest woman of all was visited by smelly, dirty, strange men and their sheep! The Blessed Mother was truly the ultimate gracious hostess. Exactly who is coming for Christmas? The Son of God.

I think that I am the perfect hostess called to juggle the needs and wants of competing interests. I think I have to find the perfect gift for everyone on my list and wrap it in the perfect paper. I think we need to stick to the traditional twelve course Italian feast or I will disappoint my late grandmother. (Truth be told, my grandmother would have been so thrilled with all my children, she wouldn't have cared about food at all.) I think I have to have a perfectly decorated house that smells of Christmas, despite my asthmatic children. Advent isn't supposed to be a marathon of materialism and merrymaking. Christmas isn't also known as "the feast of cooking, cleaning, and shopping."

Christmas is a time to be Christ to one another. It is permission in a largely secular society to witness to the wonders of the Lord. In reality, the only thing perfect about Christmas is the Christ Child who longs to find shelter in our hearts.

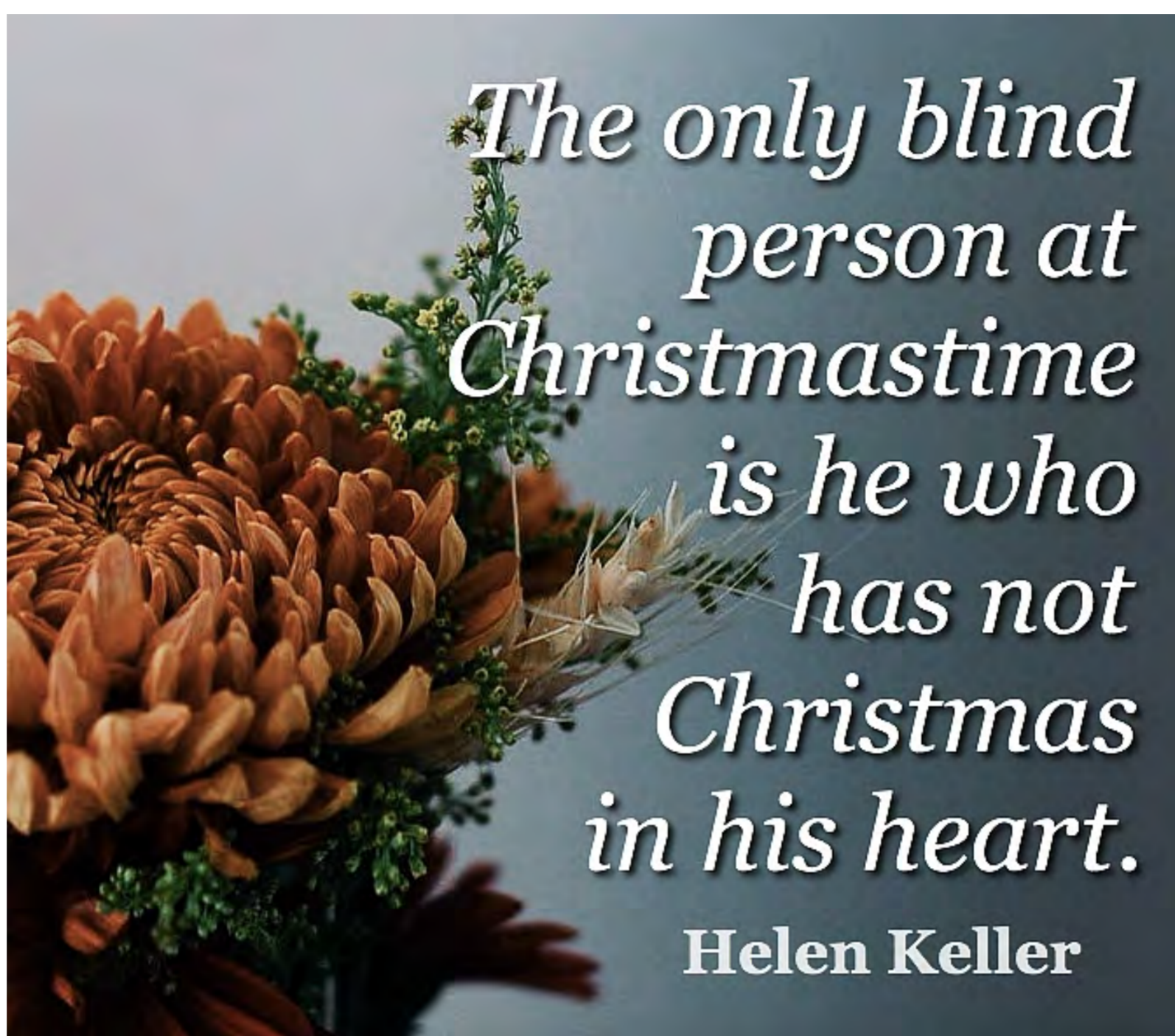


I am not Martha Stewart. I am an innkeeper. I am preparing a place in my home and in my soul for the Savior of the World. I need to be so grounded in prayer that Christ's peace overflows from me to those in my home. Let the visitors come. Let them come whenever they want and stay as long as they want. I will make the house warm and the food filling, but above all, I will make certain that the Holy Infant is here. He will be the reason for our celebration. If He can cause the lion to lie down with the lamb, He can handle Christmas at my house. Despite all the other things on my list, I must make time for earnest, fervent prayer, because I know that I can't do this under my own strength. I must invite the Baby. The only perfection here this year will be the Baby. Because a Baby at Christmas is what it's all about.

As I sit in my Bible chair and sift through my memories to compile them for you, one thing strikes me as really important to tell you from the beginning. Carefully cultivate your traditions with endurance in mind. Do things-- create memories--that will endure. It might seem like a great idea to move your gift giving away from Christmas Day in order to step away from the secular celebration, but will that be a good idea 15 years from now? When two of your children are away at school and six remain at home, will you want to continue to give gifts on St. Nicholas Day? We had a moment of reckoning with our stocking tradition—a time when we wondered if we'd relinquish the St. Nicholas celebration and leave the stockings for later after all these years. We decided that our stockings can stay safely here and wait for our boys to come home. They make a for a grand homecoming welcome, but if the whole family gift exchange happened in their absence, we'd all suffer even more those fierce pangs of loneliness and missing one another that come with the end of the semester and the intensity of exam week. They know that the stocking awaits, and they also know that right around the time stockings are being opened at home, a care package arrives at school, so that St. Nicholas day comes to life in a dorm room after all. As you craft traditions in your family, consider their suitability over time. But don't think you have to be a slave to your traditions. Let them grow and change organically. Get the angel stocking because that's what your family does, but keep the snowman one tucked away safely because you never know what God has planned.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Let Me See You



THINK

The only blind person at Christmastime is he who has not Christmas in his heart.

--Helen Keller

PRAY

Sweet Jesus, I am so blind to the blessings! I see the messes, my perceived failures, all the things I've done, only to have them undone before anyone notices my forward progress. I'm blind. I'm blind to Your goodness and I'm clenched up so tightly that I'm missing the showers of grace. Open me! Open my eyes to the Christmas unfolding before my eyes--the miracle of God in the midst of the mess. Open my hands to Your hands in mine. Let me see You!

ACT

Last week, on a whim, Mary Beth and I went through all sorts of pictures, specifically looking for evidence of the messes. We found some! (And then we set them to music.)The exercise was really, really good for me. To sift through those pictures and to see the memories from the safe distance of time was to see them with fresh (and more relaxed) eyes. Grant yourself the grace today to see the beautiful in your messes. Take a mental snapshot and share it with Jesus. Be sure to thank Him for the beautiful mess--and mean it.



Christmas Trees and Glad Tidings

Mike left to take Patrick to North Carolina for a soccer tournament at 4:30 Friday morning and I promptly ~~had a nervous breakdown~~ went back to sleep. When I awoke, I surveyed my house, consulted the calendar, did the math, and figured there is no way we're getting floors before Christmas. A bit desperate and rather impatient, I called my Christmas Design Consultant (who lives at a nearby university) and begged him for help.



He was easily bribed with Peppermint Crackle cookies and rushed right over to help us make merry. The tree went up at last, much to the delight of my little girls (and me).

And we decorated to our hearts' content.



Well satisfied with his handiwork, Michael settled in to watch the NCAA soccer semifinals. I made dinner--and worked on the last two chapters of the books I'm writing with Danielle Bean. That's right. I wrote while cooking dinner. Only one of us can actually keyboard at a time. So, Danielle typed and I mashed potatoes. I think this is very appropriate for books written by moms, for moms. And just as dinner was put on the table, we were finished.

And delighted. A very good day after all.

The Rest of the Story

You've read about the Friday that shone with God's grace. Now, let me tell you about the Saturday that followed it. I woke up Saturday morning, gazed at the tree (sans contacts or glasses) and thought it didn't look quite as pretty as in years past. Then, I spoke aloud to myself: Stop it! Stop being such a ridiculous, persnickety perfectionist. You are going to scar these children for life if you say one bad thing about this tree that they've so lovingly erected and decorated. Just stop it!

And then, it unfolds predictably;-)

I make myself a cup of tea and stop at the computer to check the day's busy schedule. Glancing at the clock, I thank God for an extra half hour and write a column that was due two days previously. I send it off, get breakfast for the masses, and then launch headlong into basketball and futsal and a bit of shopping. I arrive home about 2:30, just a half hour before everyone from Karoline to Mary Beth are set to go to a birthday party at my friend Susanna's. Mike and Patrick are in NC at a soccer tournament. Michael is back at school and Christian is coaching Stephen's basketball game. Sarah Annie hasn't napped yet and I am looking very forward to putting her down and enjoying the rare luxury of several hours alone in my house to clean. Mothers of many children will assure you that hours alone in one's house to put it all in order is a luxury indeed.

I stop to look at the tree. I look a little more closely. I stick my head inside and look at the branches. They are numbered. "Ten" is on the bottom and the top branch cluster is "1." I look a little more closely. "Nine" and "6" look much the same. Except for the direction in which they are pointing. I compare the "9" with the ten below it and "6" with the "7". Wrong direction. The "9s" are where the "6s" belong and vice versa. When the "9" row went in (with "6s" instead), we were two branches short. No problem. Just turn that hole to the corner and no one will be the wiser. Carry on.

I try to just do a quick switch. But wait, there's more! It's a pre-lit tree. Every branch in a row is wired to the one beside it. (Yes, you read that right). There are no quick switches to be had. I call Michael for clarification. Explanation. He's clear as mud.

I stick my head in there again.

When the "6" row went in with (the "9s" instead) there were too many branches. No problem. Just add those 9s-into-6s to the "5" row and keep moving up. Put the "extra "5s" in "4" row and the "4s" in the "3" row and so on. When you get to the top, then what? Mary Beth is watching me make this discovery. "Oh, yeah," she shrugs, "I remember him saying something about leftovers." Sure enough, the "leftovers" are just resting on top of other branches, without a hole to call their own.

Leftovers! It's an artificial Christmas tree. Who has leftovers?!

Mary Beth gathers everyone to walk to the birthday party. Silence settles in my house. I put the baby to sleep, thinking all the while about whether or not it is over-the-top perfectionistic to fix this tree. It is not. It must be fixed. This tree would bug Mike. I know that Karoline will be devastated to see the tree come apart. I know that I will have no patience for this task if Sarah Annie is awake. I know that my house is empty except for a sleeping baby. I know what I must do.

I get a ladder from the garage. I take every last ornament off the tree. Then, I remove the lights. Yes, I did say it was a pre-lit tree, but last year, half those lights didn't light. This year, I thought I was oh-so-clever and I asked Michael to stop and buy brand new lights before coming to put up the tree. So it would be a minimal fuss kind of thing. You know? No messing with lights to figure out what went wrong..

I'm 5'2" The tree is nine feet tall. Removing lights is accomplished by climbing up and down and then moving the ladder. Up and down and then moving the ladder. Over and over. Then, I switch the branches. Then, I string the lights again. Up and down and then moving the ladder. Over and over. My respect for my husband is growing exponentially. Those lights have to make it all the way around the tree just so. You can't have two feet bare at the bottom. You don't want them too spaced out at the top. Up and down and up and down. Done!

Stephen goes to the party after his game, comes home, asks for extra time for all. Yes! I mentally make a note to bake Susanna extra cookies next week. Can she see me in my sunroom from her back window? Am I the laughingstock of the neighborhood? For once, I truly could not care less.

Christian arrives home. He sits in wise silence for some time, watching me. I think he might just be smirking. He says something about how Dad always..

I shoot him a withering look.

He begins to hand me fragile ornaments for the top. I enjoy putting them exactly where I want them. I wonder about a new tradition. One where the children disappear for a few hours and the tree magically appears in their home. I wonder..

Sarah Annie awakens. Christian retrieves her from my bed. One by one, he helps her carry every single ornament to me. And every single time she says, "Ohhhhh," pursing her lips just so. And every single time I say, "Thank you!" and am rewarded with dimples. The three of us settle into an unexpectedly happy routine. Christian is shy and very quiet. He does not relish the noise of our household. I think how much more pleasant this impromptu tree-trimming party is for him. Come to think of it, it is rather more pleasant for me, too.

When the tree is fully decorated, I step back to look at our work. It's just beautiful. It really, really is. (But my house is still trashed--a story for another day perhaps). Christian and I treat ourselves and Sarah Annie to Indian carryout in the glow of the twinkling lights.

I briefly reflect on not one, but two, tree trimming days. On time that was granted when needed. God gives us grace for the day. Each tree-trimming day had a grace of its own. The truth is, when I look back on this day, my memory will surely be a funny one. And a sweet one. Twinkling time with my two shyest, quietest children. I find myself thanking God (and Michael) for a most unexpected blessing.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Let Me See You

Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child.



THINK

"Advent is concerned with that very connection between memory and hope which is so necessary to man. Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope. The purpose of the Church's year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart's memory so that it can discern the star of hope..."

It is the beautiful task of Advent to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope." --Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

PRAY

Father God, please let me hear it anew! The story that is told every time this year--let me hear it with fresh ears. Awaken in me the hope that rushes in where memory is warm and familiar.

ACT

The Jesse Tree tradition is one that takes us every year through the memory album of salvation history. It is a worthy trip to take with children of every age, as the memory takes on a more beautiful patina with passing time. I encourage you to find a Jesse Tree resource and make this devotion a part of your Advent.

Free instructions for readings and ornaments and craft swap
The Greatest Gift



A Dad at Christmas

"Sing of Mary, pure and lowly:

"Virgin mother, undefiled.

"Sing of God's own Son, most holy,

"Who became her little Child.

What about Joseph? Shall we sing of Joseph? Jesus was God's own Son. Jesus was Mary's little Child. And she was the pure mother. Still, God knew they needed Joseph. Or, perhaps He knew that we would need Joseph.

As she traveled far from home on a donkey, great with Child, did she lean on him? Did she trust him, the man to whom God entrusted both mother and Babe? So often, Christmas carols bring to mind the mother and the Child. Lately, though, they call to my mind someone else. I think of the man who was father to Christ and husband to Mary.

One strong man. I see his hands, sure and able. He is a carpenter, a craftsman, the capable, skilled provider so needed by both mother and Babe. God clearly was working beyond the bounds of nature when the Holy Spirit came upon a virgin and the Son of God was conceived. Even under those extraordinary circumstances, God, in His wisdom, gave Mary a husband and Jesus a dad. I think He knew how much dads bring to a Christmas story. Indeed, I think He wanted us to know how much dads bring to every birth story and every family's story.

Nothing is more counter-cultural than the story of Joseph. Television and movies love to portray the family man as a bumbling idiot. Think about how often Dad messes up and it's Mom (or the kids) who comes to the rescue and teaches him a lesson. That is not my reality. In my world, Dad is strong and steady and mostly wise. Admittedly, I live in a blessed world and modern family statistics do not reflect the biblical model. This is a short post. I could write volumes about absent fathers and splintered families and forgiveness and redemption. I've lived that, too. Instead, in this short space, I am focusing on intact families.

In the biblical world, Joseph led Mary to the safe shelter of the stable. He was there to ensure that Jesus was safely born and carefully nurtured despite formidable challenges of the "birthing inn." And he led them safely into Egypt despite overwhelming obstacles. When safely home in Nazareth, we know that Joseph provided a home for the family. He spent hours teaching his craft to Jesus, no doubt tangibly mentoring. He was husband and father.



For so many years, I had a baby or was expecting a baby during this time of year. Christmas was so much about the baby. The empathetic meditation of Mary on her journey or Mary near the manger came easily. I could feel being heavy with child. I could feel fear and exhaustion. I could feel the tenderness a mother has for her new baby. Now, my babies are growing and my perspective is changing. I see many layers in the Christmas story. I see the richness it holds for family life. My children keep me busier than ever, yet, when the crèche is lit and lovely in my living room, I find myself thinking more and more about Joseph.

I see Mary gratefully being lifted down from the donkey, sinking a bit into his warm strength. I see her trusting him when he tells her that whatever lies ahead, they will face it together, with God as their guide. I see her knowing that he will be there, come what may, to help her do the unimaginable and raise the Son of God. Did she reach up and hold his face in her hands and know the comfort that comes with looking into the eyes of someone who shared miracles with her? There is a tenderness that comes with living life in a family as husband and wife — a tenderness that we see as we look upon the familiar Nativity scene with fresh eyes.

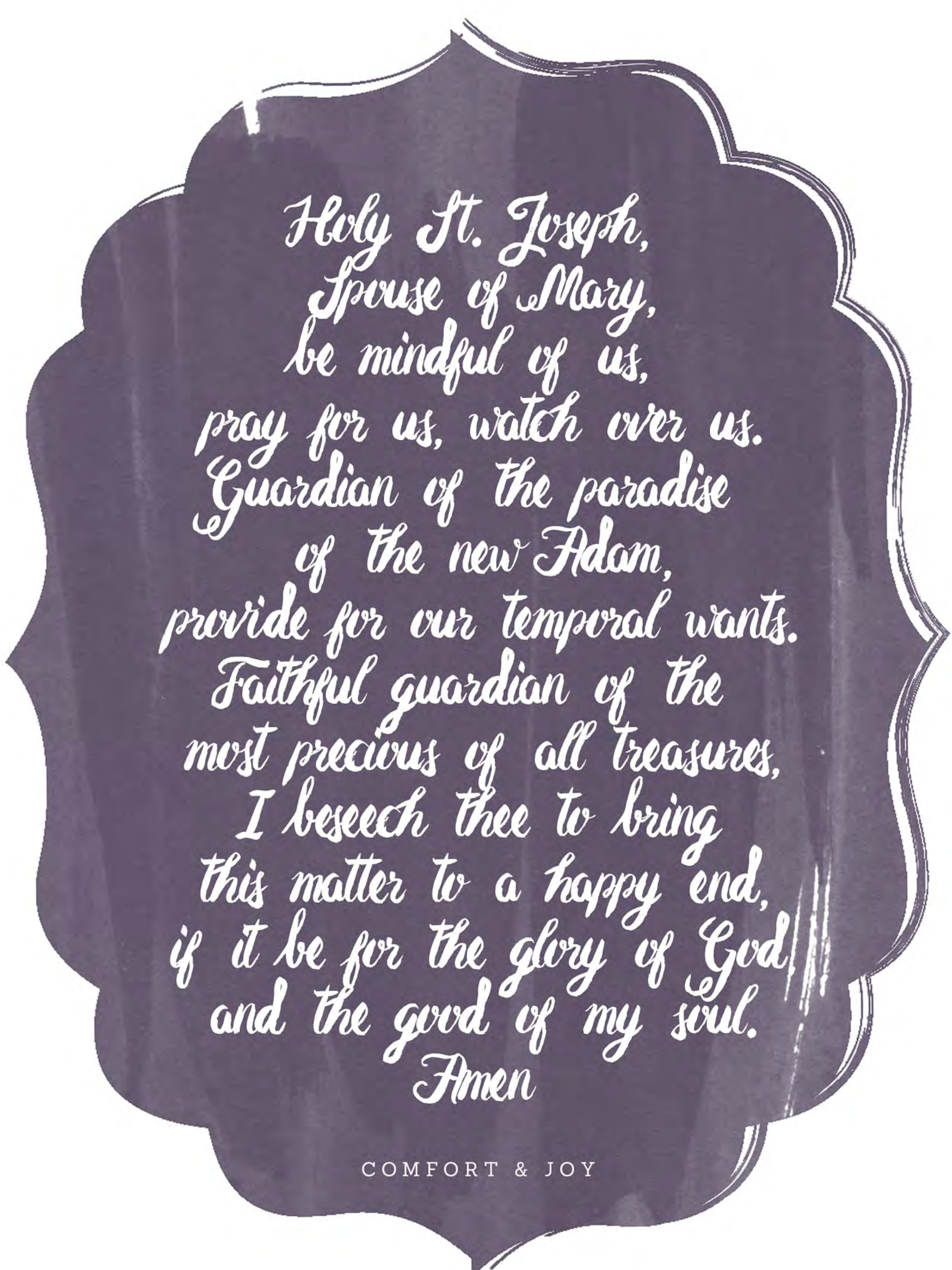
It has been said that the greatest gift a man can give his children is to love their mother. One must agree; that's quite a gift. And what is the greatest gift a wife can give her husband? During a season so focused upon children, so consumed with creating "magic" for little ones, can she spend some time in prayer, contemplating the real miracle of marriage and genuinely thanking God for the gift of her husband?

In a world that pulls on families and tugs with commitments, in a life that is often focused almost solely on children, can the heart of the Advent mother look toward the great gift of a husband? Can she see the blessing of a provider, the strength of the gentle man in her own smelly stable? Will her children know that she loves their father? Can that be the great gift this year? God didn't overlook the detail of the man at Mary's side. He could have designed the Nativity scene very differently. But He chose a holy man of quiet strength and steady wisdom. He blessed the Holy Family with a dad.

We've had some epic arguments at Christmas. I use the term "epic" the classic way--long, drawn-out, a little poetic... They usually happen in that last week, the one dedicated to love. They are a function of fatigue mostly and also of too much time spent apart meeting the needs of the season and not enough time nurturing each other. This year, at the conclusion of the St. Andrew prayer every day, I will pray this prayer, asking St. Joseph to pray with me that our marriage will grow into a reflection of mutual trust and tenderness as we journey together towards the stable and the Baby. Maybe we can avoid that third week skirmish.



Holy St. Joseph, Spouse of Mary,
be mindful of us, pray for us, watch over us.
Guardian of the paradise of the new Adam,
provide for our temporal wants.
Faithful guardian of the most precious of all treasures,
I beseech thee to bring this matter to a happy end,
if it be for the glory of God,
and the good of my soul.
Amen



*Holy St. Joseph,
Spouse of Mary,
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Guardian of the paradise
of the new Adam,
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I beseech thee to bring
this matter to a happy end,
if it be for the glory of God,
and the good of my soul.
Amen*

COMFORT & JOY



#LivingtheLiturgy: The Gift of Self



THINK

"And when we give each other Christmas gifts in His name, let us remember that He has given us the sun and the moon and the stars, and the earth with its forests and mountains and oceans--and all that lives and moves upon them. He has given us all green things and everything that blossoms and bears fruit and all that we quarrel about and all that we have misused--and to save us from our foolishness, from all our sins, He came down to earth and gave us Himself." -- Sigrid Undset

PRAY

Oh God, I think I might have missed the point. I sit with my lists--six different gift lists--and I brainstorm and order and check off. I fret about it all. The right thing? Not enough? Will they understand the thought? And, surrounded by your extravagant generosity, I persist in quarreling and misusing your carefully chosen gifts. Please forgive me. Save me from my foolishness. Grant me the grace and strength to amend my ways.

ACT

Give a gift today that costs no money. Spend time. Give the gift of self. Look someone in the eye. Slow down. Brew a cup of tea. Make hot chocolate. Sip, instead of guzzling.

Listen well.

Time is a precious, priceless gift.

Use it well.



Celebrating the Feast of St. Barbara: Building Gingerbread Houses

Today is the Feast of St. Barbara.

The legend of St. Barbara is one that easily captures the imaginations of three little girls I know who dearly love Rapunzel. Barbara was the beautiful daughter of a rich and powerful grain merchant, a pagan named Dioscuros. She grew up in Turkey. In order to keep her from suitors or men with less than honorable motives, he locked her in a tower whenever he was away on business. Upon arriving home from one of those trips, he saw that the tower had not two windows as it had previously, but three. Barbara confessed that she'd become a Christian after being baptized by a priest who'd entered the tower disguised as a doctor. She'd had the third window put in to symbolize the Holy Trinity.

A nice St. Barbara tradition is the forcing of flowers to bloom and there's probably plenty of time for your family to acquire an amaryllis or Christmas cactus to bloom in time for Christmas.

One of my favorite St. Barbara traditions isn't mine at all. My stepmother's name is Barbara. Every year, she invites every Barbara she knows—and she's collected quite a few of them over the years-- to a brunch at her house to celebrate St. Barbara's day. The only common denominators the women share are their name and their friendship with my stepmom. Somehow, she takes this varied collection of women, young and old, and brings them together into a community for a festive celebration every year.

At our house, we seize the opportunity to celebrate the patroness of architects by constructing some houses of our own. December 4th is a good day for Gingerbread Day! St. Barbara's father was a grain merchant and breads are traditional celebratory foods. Since several of us can't even think about eating wheat, using it to build is a far better way to celebrate for us.

We read Jan Brett's Gingerbread books for artistic inspiration and then, my children construct and decorate gingerbread houses. We love re-acquainting ourselves with [The Gingerbread Baby](#), [Who's that Knocking on Christmas Eve?](#), [Home for Christmas](#), [Christmas Trolls](#), and [Wild Christmas Reindeer](#). I usually purchase kits and pair the children with each other so that we have one house for every couple children. It invariably turns into a competition. One year, I thought I was being particularly thrifty and I did away with cookie houses and bought plastic ones thinking that the yearly purchase of kits would no longer be a budget item if we could just re-use the plastic ones. Terrible idea.

When I made gingerbread houses in a classroom, I used school milk cartons and glued graham crackers to the side. I stuck them on Chinet plates and gave each child royal icing and candy and let them go town. Perfect!

When we finish decorating, I spray the houses with hairspray or acrylic finishing spray. I do this for two purposes: it seem to keep bugs from being interested and it keeps children from nibbling at the house throughout Advent. They never get eaten. The candy is pretty and sweet to look at, but we never do experience the sugar high or the crash. A nice thing about our Gingerbread tradition? It's one of those crafts-and-sweets tradition that survives and thrives even as the children grow into young adults. They still love to make gingerbread art.





#LivingtheLiturgy: Plan with Plenty of Margin



THINK

"One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power—political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power—even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are...What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life." —Henri Nouwen

PRAY

Ok, God. I am not in control; You are. Please help me to stop gripping so tightly to my illusions of power and to open my hands to grace instead.

ACT

Spend some time today making lists and making plans. Before you begin, offer the endeavor to Jesus and beg the grace of prudent discernment. Plan with plenty of margin—leave room for God's better plans. And if the money thing begins to niggle doubts that you can even pull this season off, give it to Him. Trust the God of loaves and fishes with your money and your time. Give it all to Him and trust in the miracle.



Give up on Being Perfect

So, here it is. Advent again. What are you giving up? Yes, I know it's the other purple liturgical season, the one with ringing bells and office parties and songs about flying reindeer and dancing snowmen. However, Advent is known in the Church as the "Little Lent." It's a time to fast and wait and prepare for the coming of the Lord. I think we should all give something up.

I vote for giving up on being perfect. This advent, let's all listen carefully to Anna Quindlen, who says, "The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself."

Give up on the magazine-perfect meal plans and visions of completely coordinated handmade gift wrap. Give up on trying to make your house look like a Hallmark commercial. Give up on the expectation and the pressure you put on yourself to do it all — whatever "it all" is — perfectly. Instead, stop and ask the infant in the manger who you are, who He calls you to be. And then become that woman.

Are you a wife? Be a really good wife. I did a little experiment the other day. I listened to women talk to their husbands as I shopped. It was appalling. No one had a kind word to say. If you are a wife, then once upon a time, you stood in front of God and everybody and promised to cherish a man you loved so much you thought your heart would burst. Be that woman. Speak words of genuine appreciation. Offer a backrub. Stop your incessant activity and just sit and listen. Love him and become yourself.

Are you a mother? Be a really good mother. Children are generally overwhelmed with the constant noise and activity and stuff of this season. Rescue them. Give in to the pleas for hot chocolate (even though it's a bother and a mess) and nestle in with a good book and read to them. These are the children you carried so tenderly home from the hospital when they were scarcely larger than a sack of sugar. Remember the woman you were that day? Your world stopped for them. Your world was them. Turn down the lights and light some candles. Stay up late together or linger in bed for an early morning snuggle. Give them the gift of a mother who truly sees them when she looks at them and truly hears them when they speak. Give them the gift of focused attention. Love them and become yourself.

No one in your house needs perfect. No one cares very much about your checklist and they care even less about the checklist you found online. They love you. God created you with this family in mind. He entrusted the souls of those dear people to your care. The Christmas of His design took place in a smelly cave, without a proper hostess. Are you going to try to one-up him with your plans for perfect or are you going to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect? Maybe the perfect Advent and so, the perfect Christmas, begins in front of the Tabernacle. And maybe it begins with an honest question: who did He create me to be and how can I best do the work of becoming myself?



#LivingtheLiturgy: The Answer is Faith



One day you will understand



THINK

We think about our Lady on the way to Bethlehem. Do we really think deeply enough about what she suffered? And about Saint Joseph's suffering? How do we think he felt to take her off in her condition of expectancy, riding the mule to Bethlehem? Her heart must have been tempted to question, "Why is this?" And surely his heart was tempted to question. Neither was supine; these were real people.

There are struggles asked of us, as were asked of them. And the answer is faith. We will see later on, of course, in the Scriptures, that it says very plainly that she didn't understand what Jesus said to them after those three days' loss. And she asked him, "Why did you do that?" Those words, in a sense, sum up her whole relationship with the Son of God, who was the Son of her womb. And he gives her an answer that she doesn't understand at all. He says to all of us, in a different place in the Scriptures, "What I am doing you cannot understand now, but later you will understand." That is a precious thought to hold in our hearts. How many times we say, "I just don't understand this", and he says, "One day you will understand."

In the inevitable struggles of life—and the struggles of these special days—we don't need to understand. We just need to respond, and then to hear him say, "One day you will understand. One day I will explain everything to you—except when that day comes, you won't need to ask."

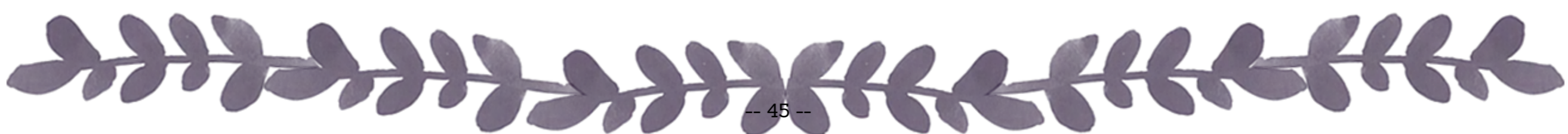
-- Mother Mary Francis, Come, Lord Jesus

PRAY

God, I earnestly and sincerely give to You all things I don't understand. Please cultivate in me a spirit of peace.

ACT

Make a list. Write down the things that are troubling you, the things you don't understand. Fold it and tuck it beneath your manger scene. Let Him have it and trust Him to do what is right and good and perfect for you in love.



Breath of Heaven

Today is the Feast of St. Nicholas. We celebrate the name day of our Christmas baby. We also remember that this would have been my father-in-love's 92nd birthday. I'm sure that many of you can relate to the stony silence or outright ugliness that some family members share when you announce a new pregnancy. This was my experience many times.

But never with my husband's dad.

Never.

He didn't hoot and holler and dance around the room. That would have been totally out of character. Instead, the moment he heard my first baby was on his way, he made plans to retire. Quit. His. Job. That's right, my father-in-love became a grandfather at home even before I became a mother at home. Good thing, too, because the year after that, I had cancer and needed him full-time.

He was the gentle soul who loved children so dearly. I miss him every single day.

He was, for me, a living embodiment of the saint of his birthday. Jolly, patient, good old soul.

Today, our family celebrates him and we celebrate St. Nicholas and I remember. I remember that our Nicholas was a surprise. I remember that my body still hadn't fully recovered from Stephen's birth and I was terrified. I remember that we had no maternity insurance. I remember that we leapt high into faith and trust and God caught us up in strong arms. I remember that now. But then? Then I was scared:

~ ~Be With Me Now~ ~

Just before Easter, I found myself singing Christmas carols. Songs about miraculous babies and humble homes filled the air at our house. One song in particular played itself over and over again in my mind:

I have traveled
many moonless nights,
cold and weary, with a babe inside...
I am waiting in a silent prayer,
I am frightened by the load I bear.
In a world as cold as stone
must I walk this path alone?



Be with me now.

Be with me now...

Breath of heaven hold me together

be forever near me

Breath of heaven...

Breath of heaven, light in my darkness

pour over me your holiness, for you are holy.

Do you wonder as you watch my face,

if a wiser one should have had my place?

But I offer all I am

for the mercy

of your plan.

Help me be strong.

Help me be...

help me.



This song, from one of Amy Grant's Christmas albums, has become my theme song in the weeks since learning we are expecting our sixth baby. I spend my moonless nights with a toddler who cannot sleep and wants to nurse and I sing the song to him, tears rolling down my face, wondering how I will meet the needs of two babies when my Christmas miracle is born. I am cold in the darkness, despite the comfortable home that envelopes us. I hardly notice the weariness; it has been so long since I was without it.

The load I bear: is it my burden or God's? He says that his yoke is easy, his burden is light. This load must be of my own making. I must make things harder than they need to be. Once again, I try to re-examine, to re-organize. A friend whispers quietly that organization is not the problem. She suggests that it is time to accept the uncontrollable stressors in my life and to embrace them as part of God's plan. She suggests that, with this pregnancy, I learn contentedness. I sigh.

Much of the world is as cold as ice. Our joyful news is met with disdain or off-color jokes. Or it is met with silence. It is the silence that hurts the most. No shouts of joy, no prayers of thanksgiving, no assurances of support, only disapproving silence. Though these responses chill me, particularly when they are the reactions of loved ones, I am warmed by the sincere joy conveyed by others. I remind myself again and again of the words of my friend Mary Alice, "Another Foss kid? What could be better? Foss kids are great!" Despite the suggestions to hire a nanny because there will be no one willing to help me, I know that I am not alone at all.

It is time to relinquish my tightly held notions of control. It is time to acknowledge that I, and my busy household, can be held together by the mere breath of heaven. For all my planning and all my "management," what is really necessary is that I seek His grace.

I wonder what He sees when He gazes upon my face. I look at the faces of my children and I marvel at the greatness of His creation. They are so beautiful. I want only for a little bit of that beauty to be reflected in my face. Instead, I see worry lines and tired eyes. Breath of heaven, remind me again of a childlike faith.

There is such mercy in His plan. We want this baby so much. My children are overjoyed at the promise of this most wonderful Christmas present. And the timing? God understands time far better than I do. He sees eternity, I only see a calendar filled with far too many human commitments.

Help me be strong. Help me.





#LivingtheLiturgy: Find a Corner



THINK

"I can recall in my childhood the continuous excitement of long days in which nothing happened; and an indescribable sense of fullness in large and empty rooms. And with whatever I retain of childishness (and whether it be a weakness or otherwise, I think I retain more than most) I still feel a very strong and positive pleasure in being stranded in queer and quiet places in neglected corners where nothing happens and anything may happen; in unfashionable hotels, in empty waiting-rooms, or in watering-places out of the season. It seems as if we needed such places, and sufficient solitude in them, to let certain nameless suggestions soak into us and make a richer soil for the subconsciousness." -- G. K. Chesterton

PRAY

You knit me and you know me. You know how very much I need sufficient solitude. You are Providence. I trust that You will help me find the neglected corners and that You will meet me there.

ACT

Seek a place of sufficient solitude. Stay there until peace settles. Don't feel guilty. You are allowed and encouraged to move away from the crowds and spend some time alone.



Light One Candle for Peace

I trip over the dog as I get out of bed and I land on a Lego. To my credit, I utter not a sound, lest I wake the baby. I shiver in the cold and make my way to the kitchen. Flipping on the light, I survey the remains of some teenaged boy's midnight foraging. A long sigh escapes my lips. Just days until Christmas and so very much to do. I drop two milk chocolate kisses and one candy cane kiss into the bottom of my coffee cup. That will do it, I am sure. Strength for the day. Except that I forget to put the coffee in the pot, and now hot water is melting the candy at the bottom of my cup. Back up. Start over. With coffee this time.

I light a candle, grab my devotional and settle into my chair. There are 3-year-old footsteps on the stairs. Within seconds she's in my lap, all warm and soft from sleep and breathing morning breath in my face as she begs to hear the Grinch for the 59th time. And she wants it like Daddy does it, with the silly voices and all. Indeed. Daddy is several hundred miles away, asleep in a warm, tidy hotel room, no doubt. It's easy to see there's no escaping this without risking loud protests that would wake the baby, or the eight other people asleep here. We get a blanket, hunker down and pay homage to Seuss.

By book's end, my kitchen is crowded with hungry children and my day is well underway. I blow out the candle, leave the devotional, and lurch headlong into the day. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the Advent wreath — the pink candle taunting me with its importance. So much to do! So much to do!

Every place I turn it seems, I am met with obstacles. A load of laundry damp and stinking accuses me from the washer. Yes! I want to shout back. Yes, I forgot you. Get over it. Get clean. I'm doing the best I can. The phone rings. My children have been instructed only to hand me the phone if it is one of a very few people today. They hand me the phone. It's one of those people. I tell her about my list, the million things that call to me, the major home renovation put on hold with my house in a state of neither here nor there. The book deadline looming large at the end of the month. How can I possibly make all this happen? Any of this happen?

She asks about my devotional time. I tell her about the kisses, the hot water, the Grinch. I laugh. She doesn't.

"You need to stop and pray. And you need to do it with your kids right now, so that they, too, become channels of grace."

Something in her tone tells me to hang up and do whatever she tells me. I gather the gang and I explain the importance. We pray.

Peace settles, heavy in the air. Children scatter to tidy their own corners of the house. A call is made and the eldest child is glad to escape his world of papers and exams and be the hero who puts up the Christmas tree. Ornaments are pulled from the boxes, lifted lovingly from beds of tissue. We stop and look at dates and remember sentiments.

"Here's the oldest ornament of all. It says 'Our First Christmas 1987' What did your tree look like that year? What did you buy for Daddy?"

"Yes, Mary Beth, Aunt Michele bought you three 'Baby's First Christmas' ornaments — we were all overjoyed to buy all things pink that year!"

"Gracious! We have a lot of soccer balls to hang on our tree, don't we? And nutcrackers and ballet shoes..."

"Oh, look a kangaroo! This one is Sarah Annie's! A reader sent it to Mom so she'd always remember the Christmas that Sarah spent tight against Mom chest, fresh from the NICU."

As if I could forget any of it. But I do, sometimes, don't I? There it is, all aglow in the reflection of the sunroom windows, a breathtaking reminder of all the pieces of my life, all the occasions of generous grace.

Tree trimmed, Michael settles in with his little brothers to watch the NCAA soccer tournament. I head to the kitchen with my headset. As I make dinner, I hash out the final details of two new books with my co-author. She is typing furiously at her desk in New Hampshire. I am mashing potatoes. Just as we finish — finish these books! — dinner is ready. The Advent wreath sits in the middle of the table. Karoline sings, "Light one candle for peace..." and somehow that wreath doesn't look nearly as threatening as it did this morning. I search my memory. When was it that this day turned around again?

Oh.

When we stopped to pray. Yes, indeed. Light one candle for peace. The joy and love are soon to follow.





**#LivingtheLiturgy: God Poured Some
of His Goodness and Love into me**



THINK

“Once I surrender the tinsel to have the jewel, then I enter into the mystery of love. I see that I do not love anyone unless he has some goodness in him, or is lovable in some way. But, I see also that God did not love me because I am lovable. I became lovable because God poured some of His goodness and love into me. I then began to apply this charity to my neighbor. If I do not find him lovable, I have to put love into him as God puts love into me, and thereby I provoke the response of love. Now, my personality is restored and I make the great discovery that no one is happy until he loves both God and neighbor.” Archbishop Fulton Sheen

PRAY

Who is my neighbor today, Jesus? Into whom should I pour love? Show me. Provoke in me the response of love.

ACT

Deliver a latte and some cookies to someone today. If you can bring children along, all the better.



Immaculate Conception Novena Candle

I think it was my friend Katherine who first introduced me to the idea of a candle for the novena before the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. As the best ideas do, this one grew in a community of faithful mothers. It's a simple craft and lovely tradition that seems to captivate even very young children.



My candle is a plain white pillar candle. I used a butter knife to hollow out a "cave" at its base.

Inside the cave, there rests a tiny beeswax Baby Jesus.



The pure white candle hollow is covered with layers of white tulle pinned into place. Just cut a bit of tulle and ruffle it up. Embellish the tulle with a bit of lace.



Then, using some pretty pins, carefully pin the tulle over the hollowed out cave.



We'll light the candle when we say the novena prayer. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception I will pull the pins and reveal the Babe in the pure, white womb. Then we'll have the candle with the Babe to enjoy for the remainder of the season.



OPENING PRAYER

God, Our Father,
you have given us Mary whom we honor
as the Immaculate Conception.
You have favored her with holiness and purity,
freeing her from the stain of sin,
to be chosen as the Mother of Jesus.
Through her intercession and protection,
may we live our lives in holiness and
in complete trust of your loving plan for us.

Amen.

DAY ONE

O Blessed Virgin Mary, from the beginning of time
God chose you, sinless and full of grace, to be the
Mother of Jesus. Because of your unselfish "fiat," you
are for us the example of perfect faith and obedience
to what God is calling us to do.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, help us to be
open to the Word of God in our daily lives.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY TWO

O Mary, Mother of God, we honor you for your
submission to the unfolding mystery of salvation
history. From Bethlehem to Calvary, you were
present to Jesus as faithful mother and courageous
disciple, sharing in the mysteries of his life.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception,
may we be for others a living presence
of God's joy and compassion.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY THREE

O Mary of Nazareth, you were filled with the light of the Holy Spirit as you prepared for the birth of Jesus. You became the Mother of God and the Mother of the Redeemer, our mother and intercessor for the People of God, his Church.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may we wait in hopeful expectation this Advent for the coming of the Lord Jesus in our hearts.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY FOUR

O Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, you were in a sense the first tabernacle for Jesus. In your womb his Sacred Heart beat under your Immaculate Heart. You are the Vessel of Honor, the Ark of the Covenant, and Gate of Heaven. Filled with grace, you give Jesus to us that we may bring him to others.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may we have a deep and reverent love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY FIVE

O Mary, Mother of Sorrows, your heart was pierced with a sword as you stood on Calvary beneath the cross of your Son. Only a mother could experience such deep pain and anguish to see her only son die such a death.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may we acknowledge that suffering can become for us redemptive and truly identifies us as one with Jesus.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY SIX

O Mary, our Life, our Sweetness and our Hope, from age to age you are called blessed among all women. You, above all others, have a deep communion with God. You are the model of virtue, prayer and discipleship.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, lead us into a prayerful and deeply authentic relationship with Jesus so that we may be holy and reflect his goodness to others.
Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY SEVEN

O Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, your holiness and obedience changed the course of history through the redemptive power of your Son. You give us the example of discipleship and what it means to witness to the Way, the Truth and the Life—Jesus.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, we pray for holiness, especially as lived through the priesthood and consecrated life.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY EIGHT

O Mary, Mother of Divine Grace, you intercede for us and lead us to your Son. Jesus said to John, “Behold, your Mother.” You are our spiritual mother, who draws us ever closer to your Son.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may our devotion to you increase our love for Jesus.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

DAY NINE

O Mary, Seat of Wisdom, you gave Jesus,
the Eternal Word made flesh, to the world.
What a privilege was yours—to bring him forth
into the world so that all peoples and nations
may be drawn to him, Incarnate Wisdom.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, may the Gospel
of Jesus Christ, reach the farthest ends of the earth.

Help us to grow in knowledge
and love of the Blessed Trinity.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Mary, we honor you as the
Mother of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

O Mary of the Immaculate Conception, we delight
in your singular privilege of being born with the
fullness of grace, completely preserved
from the stain of original sin.

Blessed among all women,
you are especially favored by God.

Confident in that honor we place before you our
needs and intentions (name the intention).

Through your intercession,
may it be brought to fulfillment.

In gratitude for your motherly concern,
O Mary Immaculate, patroness of
the United States of America, we pray:

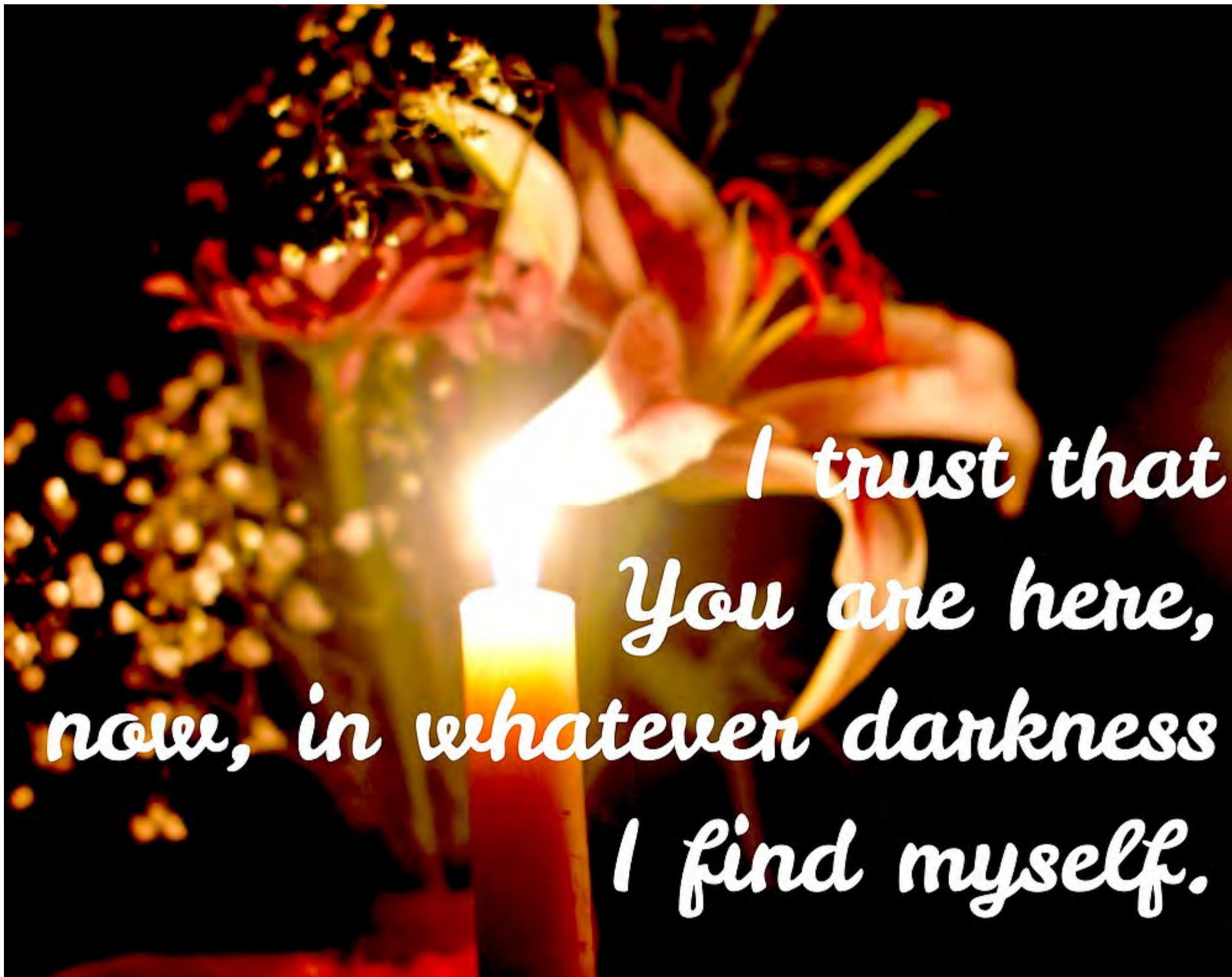
You are all beautiful, O Mary.
The original stain is not in thee.
You are the glory of Jerusalem,
The joy of Israel,
The great honor of our race,
The advocate of sinners.

Virgin most prudent, pray for us.
Intercede for us with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen



#LivingtheLiturgy: Here, Now



THINK

Acts of faith are expressed in two ways. The first is our willingness to jump into the darkness, that is, choosing to trust in God's guidance as we venture into the unknown. The second is our willingness to sit in the darkness, which is continuing to do God's will when our emotional resources are depleted and life seems hollow, meaningless and absurd. . . .

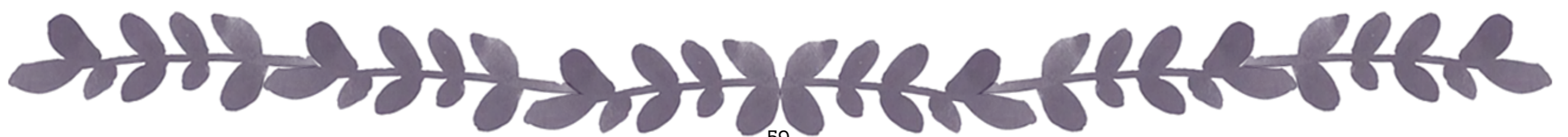
These are the worst times in our life of faith when viewed from a psychological and emotional perspective. But from a spiritual vantage point, they are potentially the best of times. For when we continue to do God's will without emotional support, our love for God and neighbor grows and is purified. --Marc Foley, *The Context of Holiness*

PRAY

God, I choose to sit with You. I trust that You are here, now, in whatever darkness I find myself.

ACT

Here's where the practice of gratitude is really helpful. Make a list of five times in your life when you felt alone, without emotional support. Now, note how you grew. Note the blessings that came with reliance on God and obedience to His will.



Entertaining Angels

'Tis the season. It's upon us. The magazines are screaming. Roll up your sleeves and roll out the red carpet. It's time to entertain!

May I offer an alternative? Instead of entertaining, offer hospitality. The differences are not subtle. When we entertain, we are often ruled by our pride. When we offer hospitality, we are inspired by charity. Entertaining seeks to impress. Hospitality seeks to minister.

In her excellent book, *Open Heart, Open Home*, Karen Mains writes:

"Secular entertaining is a terrible bondage. Its source is human pride. Demanding perfection, fostering the urge to impress, it is a rigorous taskmaster that enslaves. In contrast, scriptural hospitality is a freedom that liberates."

Entertaining says, "I want to impress you with my beautiful home, my clever decorating, my gourmet cooking." Hospitality, however, seeks to minister. It says, "This home is not mine. It is truly a gift from my Master. I am his servant, and I use it as he desires." Hospitality does not try to impress but to serve...Entertaining always puts things before people...Hospitality, however, puts people before things.

Hospitality is a ministry. As such, it is not bound by time or space. To offer hospitality, you do not have to offer an invitation; you do not even have to be at home and you certainly do not need to spend days beforehand cooking and cleaning and decorating. To offer hospitality, you have to open your heart to see and meet a need. Hospitality might be a home-cooked meal wrapped in a pretty towel and carried, still warm, to a neighbor who is going through a difficult time. The charity of an open home extended to a child while his mother has a moment to herself is hospitality extended to all. The comfort of a friend who offers a cup of tea at a well-worn kitchen table on a teary afternoon is hospitality that cannot be captured on the glossy pages of a magazine.

In order to truly extend hospitality we must put away our pride. We must be willing to open our doors, no matter the state of homes or our wardrobes, and to graciously seek to make our visitors feel welcome and at ease. When we do this, we allow people to see us as we are. We put away the pretense and we offer ourselves with all our weaknesses. They can see that we are striving humbly towards holiness and they can see that only God can perfect us. When we offer ourselves to other people and allow them to see our imperfections, we take a chance. We chance that they, too, will accept us in a spirit of charity. Hospitality works best when both the giver and the receiver assume the best about each other.

Entertaining often has a reward attached to it: social stature, a new job or a promotion, an accolade, a return invitation. Hospitality is freely-given, with no thought to reciprocity or reward. The heart that is ordered towards charity offers hospitality to those who most need it, even if those are not the people whose company we most desire. This is charity—a virtue we can model for our children when we ensure that they are hospitable to their friends and even to the child who might otherwise be excluded.

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:12-14

As we begin to practice the ministry of hospitality, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. We open our doors and our hearts and certainly some people will come through those doors who don't view our efforts through the same lens of charity. On occasion we will hear a critical comment; we will be judged according to the world's standards. We will feel as if we've come up short. But we haven't truly. Those are the times the hospitable hostess will offer to Christ, imperfect and heartfelt, knowing that He will redeem the time and the effort.

This holiday season, make hospitality your prayer. Seek to comfort and to minister. Look for ways to lighten someone else's load. In every guest, no matter how cranky, no matter how demanding, see Christ. Open your heart wide; risk allowing people to see your weaknesses. For it is in that very weakness that His power is made perfect.





#LivingtheLiturgy: A Tiny New Eden



THINK

“To a young child home stands for God. In it he learns to see and touch the gifts of God. If his mother is wise, she will make his home beautiful. She will copy the world’s creator and make a tiny new Eden. She will bring in flowers and give the child animals and feed the birds. The food on the table will be clean and simple and good. It will not only taste nice, it will look nice. From all this the child will learn naturally that God did not make the hideous travesty that we have made of created things.” (Caryll Houselander, The Mother of Christ)

~*~*~*~*~

Sometimes I wonder if the effort is worth it. I woke up this morning thinking about home and about all the ways I try to put into this home the things I wanted from home as child. There is magazine cover beautiful and there is "tiny new Eden" beautiful. In a home that is tiny new Eden beautiful, there is always a soft place to land. There are flowers, to be sure, but more importantly, there is the invitation to inhale their fragrance--there is the welcome and the urging to be a part of the beautiful, to take comfort in it, to enjoy one another amidst it. The effort we put into making things beautiful during Advent is only as valuable as the effort we put into making people feel truly at home and genuinely loved amidst the beauty.

PRAY

There is a point in beauty, Lord. You, the most extraordinary artist, made things beautiful. This is not the stuff of Pinterest competitions. This is the endeavor to let the Artist Creator live and breathe in me. Do not allow me to make a travesty of my household. Instead; help me to bring beauty from the resources You provide.

ACT

Today is a good day to buy a Christmas cactus or a poinsettia, to spruce up a corner by a cozy chair and invite someone to hear a book read aloud or to just sit with you in companionable silence.



The Trap of Self-Rejection

Advent brings with it twinkling lights, candles glowing in rosy shades of purple and pink, children with faces upturned in gleeful anticipation, ribbons and wrapping, and carols and candles. And a season of self-reproach and self-rejection. Particularly for women, no season is as tricky to navigate as the one that just precedes Christmas. The expectation of society and the expectation women have for themselves can sometimes seem as crushing as a rolling pin making “fairy dust” out of peppermint candies.

We have to stop, maybe even every morning, and ask ourselves what the goal is. For what are we striving? To whom do we answer? Why is self-reproach — the negative voice that echoes in our heads and, on very bad days, can screech us to the most throbbing of headaches — such a trap?

Self-reproach is a sin. Now, go on and reproach yourself for committing the sin of self-reproach.

Henri Nouwen writes, “Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity, and power can indeed present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection.”

In order to fall into the trap of self-rejection, we first have to care. We have to care about all the details, most of which are not in our control. We have to care about our ability to make someone else happy. Mostly, we have to care what other people think about us. In order to reject ourselves, we have to fool ourselves into thinking more and more about ourselves even as we strive to jump more and more through the hoops of other people and situations.

The way to spring the trap of self-rejection is to care less about oneself and to genuinely care more about someone else.

“How much larger your life would be if your self could be smaller in it; if you could really look at other men with common curiosity and pleasure; if you could see them walking as they are in their sunny selfishness and their virile indifference. You would begin to be interested in them because they would not be interested in you. You would break out of this tiny and tawdry theater in which your own little plot is always played, and you would find yourself under a freer sky, in a street full of splendid strangers.” (G. K. Chesterton)

Can you notice the splendid stranger in your midst? Sure you can. You have only to look with eyes that don't care a whit about what the stranger thinks of you. We are able to maintain a sense of peace during Advent and to avoid the trap of self-rejection when we just do the next thing. Focus on the next thing that truly is the task God put before you. The next thing is love. Don't do the next successful thing. Don't do the next popular thing. Don't do the next powerful thing. Do the next holy thing. Love because you are loved. And do it with your eyes on God, not on the reaction of the stranger next to you, or even the companion in your home.



Advent is not a performance. We are loved by the Creator so much that He sent His Son to die for us so that we can be happy with Him forever in heaven. During the time of twinkling lights and rosy candles, our hearts are being prepared to be opened for the greatest gift. That negative self-talk? That's not of God. It's the temptation into despair that turns our souls from joy and closes our hearts to what He offers. We are the beloved of God, not because of anything we do, but because He loves. When our actions are fueled by His love, they are free, they are relaxed and they are genuinely joyful. And we can really prepare for Christmas.





#LivingtheLiturgy: Change the Course of History



THINK

"I'm deeply moved by the simple and mysterious encounter [of the Visitation]... Two women meet each other and affirm in each other the promise given to them. The humanly impossible has happened to them. God has come to them to begin the salvation promised through the ages. Through these two women God decided to change the course of history. Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen...for three months Mary and Elizabeth live together and encourage each other to truly accept the motherhood given to them. Mary's presence makes Elizabeth more fully aware of becoming the mother of the prophet of the Most High" (Lk 1:76), and Elizabeth's presence allows Mary to grow in the knowledge of becoming the Mother of the "Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32).

The story of the Visitation teaches me the meaning of friendship and community. How can I ever let God's grace fully work in my life unless I live in a community of people who can affirm it, deepen it, and strengthen it?" --Henri Nouwen

PRAY

Today, put in my path the women that You would have me affirm on Your behalf. Give me the words. Give me the courage.

ACT

You can change the course of history. It is amazing what one kind word, one sincere smile of encouragement can do turn around a girlfriend's day. Someone needs that encouragement from you. Give generously.



Say Yes

I hear them whispering in the kitchen as I fold laundry in a room nearby. I can tell they are setting her up. Sure enough, she toddles in, carrying a box of brownie mix, so very proud that, despite her tender age, she has been entrusted with the mission.

“We make brownies, Mama?”

I hesitate for the briefest moment and then I’m slayed by the most charming two-year-old smile and big, brownie eyes.

“Yes,” I reply, hoping the joy on my face mirrors hers, even just a little.

She goes back to report, yelling “She said ‘yes!’” And the phrase rings in my ears.

She said, “Yes!” It’s a phrase often associated with the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and asks her assent to being the mother of God. Mary wholeheartedly embraces God’s plan with her fiat. She said yes. Her “yes” set in motion the salvation of mankind. It also set up mothers everywhere to work like crazy people for the first three and a half weeks of December.

We have our lists, our errands, our planning and packaging. We do it all for these dear people whom we love so much. But in the doing, do we forget the loving? The active loving? Do we say many more “nos” than “yeses?” Forget advent, I am pretty sure I am guilty of that all year ‘round.

But it wasn’t always like that. We have a home video of me with my firstborn. He was not quite two. I had just turned 24. We both had a tendency to wholeheartedly go for the “yes.” Outside of the deck of our little house, we spread butcher paper. And we fingerpainted. With our feet. There was much giggling and much smooshing of paint through our toes. My husband, behind the camera, asked why.

“Why, exactly, did you feel the need to do this? Make this mess? Haul out this stuff?”

“Because we can,” came my reply. “Because it’s fun and we’re playing with colors and we’re creating art (of sorts) and it’s an absolutely beautiful day out here. Just because we can.”

“Works for me,” came the reply and he continued to tape.

That is the last videotape we have before I was diagnosed with cancer. “Because we can” rang in my ears for the next year. I promised myself over and over that if I survived I would be a “Yes” mom. I wouldn’t be too busy, too grownup, too preoccupied to get to “yes.” I’d find a way to connect, to create, to cuddle, to care in a very active way. By golly, I’d do it because I’d be just so very grateful if only I could do it. I’d live each day fully and I’d seize every opportunity to actively live love.

And that’s the way I’ve lived, mostly. I think most folks who know me would agree that I’m pretty into my kids. Over the years, though, I have become more sedentary, a bit too likely to delegate the playing with them part, and far too likely to think twice before letting them make a mess or better, yet, making a mess with them.

That afternoon, when Sarah Anne asked for brownies, I decided that this is the Advent of “Yes.” I did it really in hopes that I could revive an old habit. So, yesterday, when Karoline asked to watch Ramona and Beezus for the bajillionth time, I said “yes.” That was pretty simple. Might even buy me an hour and a half of time to do something productive. Except she had a followup request. “You sit and watch it with me?”

Me? Sit? For an hour and a half on a Thursday afternoon? I am so not a sitter. But sit I did. I watched the whole darling movie with my three littlest girls. When it was over, there was a song playing after the credits.

“Get up and dance, Mommy!” And I did. I twirled and picked my sweethearts up in the air. We joined hands and danced in a circle. They looked at me with wonder. The wonder of “Yes.

The song? Live Like There’s No Tomorrow. We danced, in part, to these words:

Take a leap and fade and hope you fly, feel what it’s like to be alive
Give it all, what we’ve got and lay it all on the line
And we can find a way to do anything if we try to

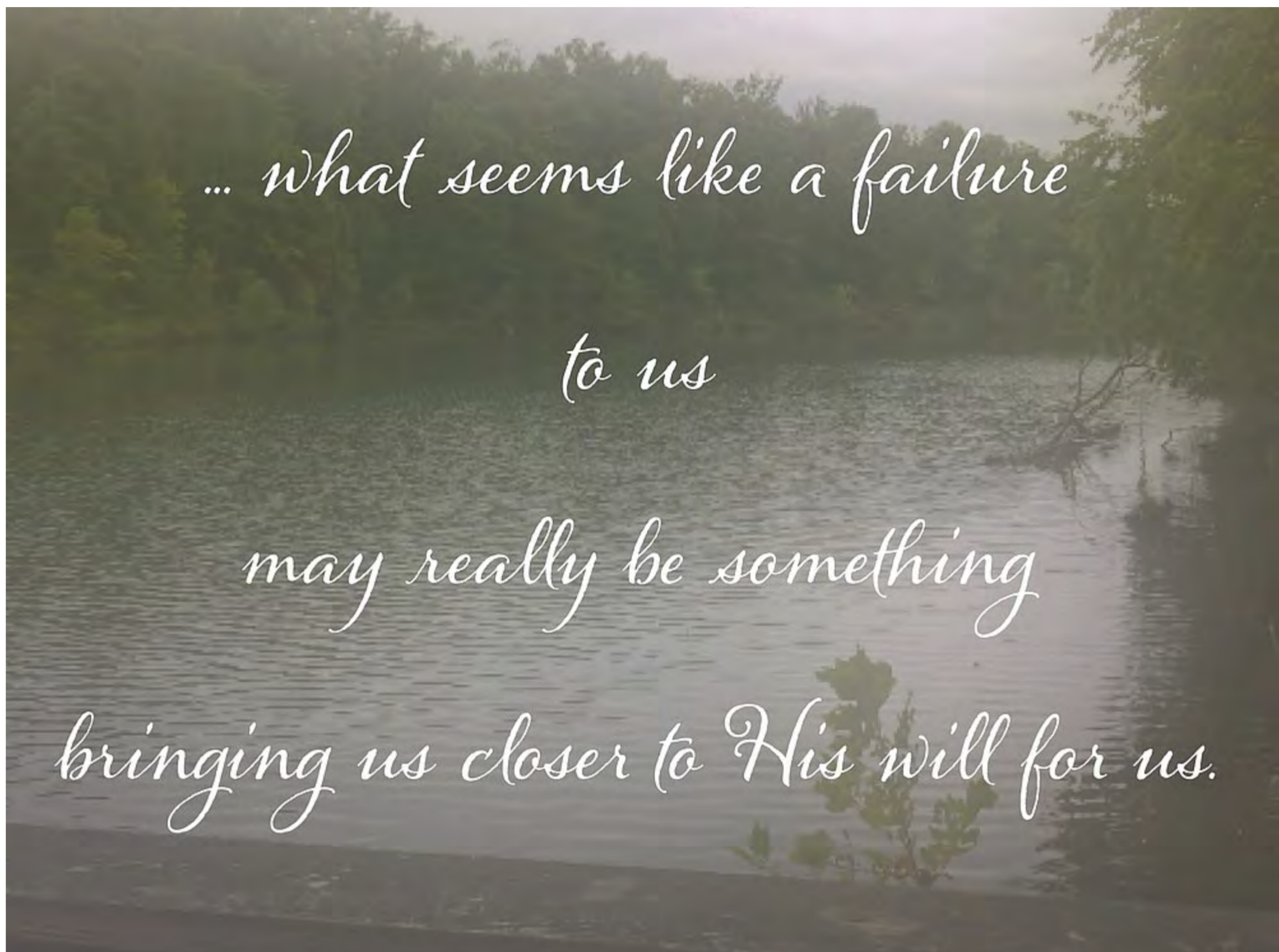
Live like there’s no tomorrow, (cause all we have is here right now)
Love like it’s all that we know. (The only chance that we ever found)

It’s nearly Christmas. We have right now. Say “Yes!”





#LivingtheLiturgy: What Seems Like a Failure



THINK

"I often think that the ideal of our perfection that we set up, and often go through torture to achieve, may not be God's idea of how He wants us to be at all. That may be something quite different that we never would have thought of, and what seems like a failure to us may really be something bringing us closer to His will for us."

~Caryll Houselander

PRAY

Dear Lord, It is so easy for me to see my failures, to count and consider every shortcoming. Please help me to see how they can bring me closer to your will for me. And please help me to be obedient and quick to your will.

ACT

Today, when that voice in your head begins to say things that are mean--things you'd never say to anyone else but you say to yourself--tell it to hush. Replace every negative thought with a positive, affirming, constructive one.



The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have salvation and power come, and the Kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed." (Rev 12:1-10)

I am reflecting on Our Lady of Guadalupe two days after the terror attacks in Paris.

There she is—timeless.

The Blessed Mother was there, at the foot of the cross. She was there when the Muslims were turned back at Lepanto. And she was there, in Paris, two nights ago. What we celebrate on this feast is the reality that she will always be there in the horror and the fear and the bloodshed and the sorrow. She will always be the rose our Lord extends to us when we are desperate for peace.

On Calvary, Our Lord tells us, "Behold your Mother" (John 19:27). He knows that when we take refuge in her mantle, we are mothered in the truest sense of the word. And when we behold Mary, she always points us to Jesus. At Cana, she tells us, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). She urges and encourages and beseeches us to repent and turn from sin. Then she does what every good mother does (only she does it better than we do): she prays for us.

Mary was a humble, young handmaiden hidden in Nazareth when Gabriel came to her with an extraordinary message of hope and grace. What he told her was unbelievable, really. In her humility, she believed. Years later, on Tepeyac, Mary appeared to a humble young Aztec named Juan Diego. Her appearance was astonishing, unbelievable, really. And in his humility, he believed.

At the beatification of Juan Diego (whose feast is December 9), Pope St. John Paul the Great said, "What was Juan Diego like? Why did God look upon him? The Book of Sirach, as we have heard, teaches us that God alone "is mighty; he is glorified by the humble" (cf. Sir 3:20). Saint Paul's words, also proclaimed at this celebration, shed light on the divine way of bringing about salvation: "God chose what is low and despised in the world ... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:28,29). "It is moving to read the accounts of Guadalupe, sensitively written and steeped in tenderness. In them the Virgin Mary, the handmaid "who glorified the Lord" (Lk 1:46), reveals herself to Juan Diego as the Mother of the true God. As a sign, she gives him precious roses, and as he shows them to the Bishop, he discovers the blessed image of Our Lady imprinted on his tilma."

On this day, we read Tomie de Paola's *The Lady of Guadalupe*. We set aside a special tea time, bless the table with some roses, and drink Mexican Hot Chocolate. We make tacos for dinner. And best of all, we find a baby (or the littlest sister) and we bless her with the words of the traditional Indian blessing, "May God be as good to you as He was to Juan Diego."

Amen.



#LivingtheLiturgy: She May Find the Christ Child



THINK

"The Russian peasantry for centuries has propagated a curious tradition. It is about an old woman, the Baboushka, who was at work in her house when the wise men came from the East and passed on their way to Bethlehem to find the Child.

'Come with us,' they said. 'We have seen his star in the East, and we go to worship him.'

'I will come, but not now. I have much housework to do, and when that is finished, I will follow and find him.' But her work was never done. And the Three Kings had passed on their way across the desert, and the star shone no more in the darkened heavens. Baboushka never saw the Christ Child, but she is still living and searching for him. And though she did not find him, out of love for him, she takes care of all his children... The tradition has it that she believes that in each poor child whom she warms and feeds, she may find the Christ Child whom she neglected long ago. But she is not doomed to disappointment, for the Divine Child said, 'He who receives one of these little ones in my name, receives me.'" ~ Bishop Fulton Sheen

PRAY

Baby Jesus, the days are growing shorter. The time is ticking faster. The date is growing closer. There's so much to do! This work will never be done. Never. Please, please God, don't allow me to miss You. Don't let me neglect You.

ACT

I know you're busy. I get it. I really do. I know you have so very much to do. But I'm giving you two more "tasks." First, you need quiet time with Jesus, as soon as possible today. Sit, be still, and just listen to what He has to say to you. Second, every time you are interrupted by a child today, stop, look the child in the eyes, and listen carefully. Every time. Nothing you are doing is so pressing it can't wait for you to look and listen to the child God has put in your life (even if he's taller than you are).



Saint Lucy

Saint Lucy is also called St. Lucia. She was born in Syracuse, Italy and martyred around 304 AD. She is so beloved! Her feast is celebrated in both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches on December 13. Interestingly, though she was Italian, she's also one of the few saints celebrated by the mostly Lutheran Scandinavian people. I love this saint for all her ability to unite the divided. The feast in Scandinavia used to be celebrated at the winter solstice, the shortest day and darkest night of the year. St. Lucia brought light to the celebration.

We know that St. Lucy secretly brought food to persecuted Christians in Rome who were hiding underground in the catacombs. In order to use both hands to carry her provisions, she lit a wreath of candles for her head so that she could see her way through the catacombs.

During our celebration at home, our oldest girl, (sometimes wearing a white nightgown, sometimes wearing something else) and a crown of candles (made of fabric), is followed by her little sisters, also wearing crowns, to awaken the boys with warm rolls and hot chocolate. It's a fun morning and the boys are good sports about staying in bed and pretending to be awakened even though it's usually the clatter in the kitchen that really wakes them.

In the evening, we celebrate the feast of the saint of lights by taking a pajama ride through the neighborhood and taking in the all the lit decorations on our neighbors' homes.

It's not always simple. Actually, it's rarely simple. And sometimes, pulling this celebration off is kind of chaotic. Also, sometimes—most times—those traditional saffron buns don't happen. We do it our way and it's still so good.

I remember this with fondness, from December nineteenth, a few years ago. Sometimes, you celebrate almost a week late. And that's just fine.



Last night, after a full day of playing in chocolate but making very little that would be presentable to anyone over the age of twelve, my darling husband mentioned that he'd like to take gifts to the office. Remembering that I had both pledged to make handmade gifts and that I had no car available to go shopping anyway, I asked if he'd like me to make some fudge. He protested, didn't want to give me one more thing to do, would be happy to have me pick up something at Costco.

Remembering earnest marriage talk I'd just had with a friend, I told my darling husband that men who work hard so their wives can stay home really should be able to count on those wives to make something lovely to take to work at Christmastime. He said fudge would be very nice. Perfect! For how many people shall I make fudge before tomorrow?

Eighteen.

Um. O.K.



I made twelve pounds of fudge today, ladies. And I packaged them in little Martha Stewart boxes. And I just checked with my children and they assured me I didn't yell at anyone in the process. The dear man called around four and asked if he could bring home the leftovers from the office Christmas lunch (enough to feed an army). I just happen to have an army and all they've eaten since the 6 AM cinnamon rolls is chocolate. If he walks through that door with real food, he could get lucky!

Did somebody ask why we had cinnamon rolls in the dark today? Because it was the pretend feast of St. Lucy and Daddy had a very early meeting, so we had to eat very early or postpone it again. No chance of postponing. Once upon a time, I used to be a baking snob. I ground wheat every other day and made four loaves of bread at a time. My children didn't know that there was such a thing as a baking mix. Then I developed a wheat allergy (probably from inhaling flour dust from the wheat grinder) and I resorted to premade cookie dough when I wanted my kids to experience the smell of baking. I became the ultimate baking slouch. Every once in awhile, the baking snob argues with the baking slouch. It happened yesterday when I was trying to figure out a recipe to mimic Panera's outrageous holiday bread. I figured it wouldn't do to have store-bought St. Lucy's buns and even the Pillsbury kind seemed like cheating. The snob and the slouch had it out and I resolved to start with cinnamon rolls in a can and doctor them up.

At 4:30 this morning, I unrolled the dough and then carefully placed (you can't sprinkle; it's too narrow) mini chips, tiny apple dices, and craisins and then re-rolled the buns. I baked them and pulled the girls out of bed to ice them. Were they good? I have no idea--I can't eat wheat. But my inner baking snob is quieted. And my little girls were very happy to wake their men to warm cinnamon rolls and peppermint hot chocolate, even if the date was all wrong.

All in all, a good day.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Don't be Afraid of Tenderness



THINK

“[Christmas] speaks of tenderness and hope. When God meets us he tells us two things. The first thing he says is: have hope. God always opens doors, he never closes them. He is the father who opens doors for us. The second thing he says is: don't be afraid of tenderness.” - Pope Francis

PRAY

Slow me down, Lord. Give me margin in which to breathe and space that grants perspective. Soften my heart and let me be vulnerable to tenderness.

ACT

Open doors today. No, really! Look for opportunities to slow yourself and to see all the doors you can open for some else.



On the Feast of St. John of the Cross

"The soul that is attached to anything however much good there may be in it, will not arrive at the liberty of divine union. For whether it be a strong wire rope or a slender and delicate thread that holds the bird, it matters not, if it really holds it fast; for, until the cord be broken the bird cannot fly."

St. John of the Cross

I love this quote at this time of year. Of course, immediately, what comes to mind is the wish-listing and the buying and the acquiring of material goods. I think, however that most of us understand the dangers of attachment to those. This year, I see the same quote a little differently. I recognize, after our discernment regarding a move, that I am attached to a place, to a notion of home, indeed, to a notion of family. I struggled mightily with the idea of leaving here, of having children far flung, of looking towards any mountains other than those rolling, blue-ridged hills. And God kept saying, "But I'll be there. I'll be there. You, know, don't you, that I will be with you wherever you go? "

We aren't moving. Is this because I have a disordered attachment to here, to my kids, to my parents and Mike's? I don't think so. We stepped through the process very carefully and we sought good counsel. I do trust that we didn't decide, but rather uncovered God's will in all of it. But as I go about my familiar Advent routine, thinking to myself that the tree must go there because it always goes there and we have to have antipasto before Christmas dinner because we always do, and I need to make a bajillion pounds of cookies and candy because that's the way we do things, I pause abruptly. Those are all attachments, however fine the thread. The reality is that our decision not to move has had financial impact. And in the past three weeks, we've had some huge unexpected expenses. I am forced to examine all those "Advent attachments" to which a dollar sign is attached. That's as it should be.

I'm also forced to examine those which are less obvious. I look at some of our traditions with a fresh perspective. Is an Advent devotion dear because it draws us closer to Christ and closer to the moments in the manger? Or is it dear for its visual or social or even culinary appeal? Is it possible that the cooking and the crafting and the grand celebrating of all the feasts of Advent can, at the end of the season, prove to be distractions, fine golden threads that keep us tethered to hearth and home, certainly, but prevent us from ascending to Divine Union?

I love this time of year, genuinely love the waiting and wondering, the cadence of our prayer life. I'm grateful that this year Advent brought a very frank examination of every aspect of our life as a family and how we live it. I'm grateful for this new budget and all its challenges. And I'm grateful for St. John of the Cross and the wisdom of his words.

The challenge before us in this new Church year is to live as a family united by love of Him and to embrace holiness and joy without being tethered to the delicate threads of the good, to the detriment of the Best.



**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Look with Appreciation**



THINK

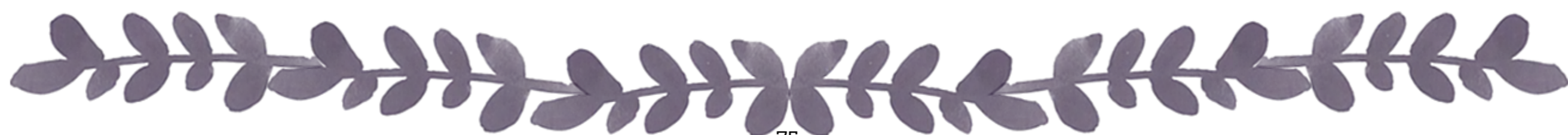
"The aim of life is appreciation; there is no sense in not appreciating things; and there is no sense in having more of them if you have less appreciation of them." ~ G. K. Chesterton

PRAY

I am overwhelmed with the acquisition process that is Christmas preparation. The food, the gifts, the decorations—it's all so much. Or it's not enough; it's a nagging burden of expectation that can't reasonably be met within one's means. Help me to see with grateful eyes what I do have. Let appreciation be the lens from which I look on my life.

ACT

Write thank you notes today to people who have blessed you far more than things ever could.



Keep it Simple, Sweetheart

I've gotten some notes from sweet, generous souls who want so much to "do Advent right." What books to read? What crafts to make? How to fast? How to pray? How to make it all meaningful and holy and right for our families? How to use this time to repent, to grow in holiness, to right the wrongs? How, especially, to touch the hearts, souls, and minds of our children?

Homeschool mamas, in particular, are a pensive bunch aren't we? We think things to death, examine them all so closely, work so hard ...

I can feel the pace quickening. I can feel the frantic concern for being sure that we are doing everything just perfectly.

I think, perhaps, we need to stop looking, stop reading, stop thinking, stop trying so hard. Stop worrying so much.

We need to touch the ones we love by being Christ to one another. Simple.

The most generous person, if not simple, is troubled, anxious, and endlessly discouraged. His very generosity sometimes inclines him to be scrupulous and, under pretext of delicacy, warps his conscience. "Am I not deceived?" he cries. "Has God forgiven me? Should I in truth do this? Am I on the right path?" He is continually asking himself a thousand disturbing and confusing questions. By self-introspection, he ends by losing his clearness of vision. He inevitably falls into a profound melancholy, a fatal discouragement.

The simple soul escapes all such dangers because he looks to God far more than to creatures and laces himself above all that obscures, fatigues, and exasperates a soul who is not simple.

The soul who is not simple is represented in the Gospel by Martha, who was restless, anxious, and concerned with many things. The simple soul is represented by Mary, tranquilly seated at the feet of the Master, drinking in each word and solely mindful of His pleasure. The simple soul has found "the better part," "the one thing necessary"; [Luke 10:42] he is wholly given to God.

Without self-preoccupation, without artifice or hypocrisy, without subterfuge or dissolution, without fear of the world's opinion, speaking as he thinks, his heart in one sense on his sleeve, such a person is always calm and tranquil. He goes on his way unanxious and untroubled, his spirit free, and his heart full of joy and peace. Neither lack of success, contempt, gossip, trials, nor even his own falls, sins, and imperfections--nothing in this world---can disturb him. He has found the peace that Jesus gives, "the joy that none can take away" [John 16:22].

Simplicity frees the soul from the burden, sometimes crushing, of the things of this world; it delivers the soul from the many vain anxieties so hard to bear. It makes it light, free, and joyous. ...

The souls who examine themselves most closely are not those who know themselves the best, nor above all, those who correct themselves most quickly. By unbandaging a wound to see whether it has healed, you end up aggravating it. On the contrary, the soul who looks to God rapidly learns self-knowledge and, what is much more important, detachment.

God is truth, and by contemplating Him, the soul becomes like Him. The simple soul knows itself at a glance; and if it happens that in certain hours of fatigue or forgetfulness the soul touches the earth, no sooner is it conscious of this than up it rises by a stroke of the wing and soars rapidly away...

The simple soul knows itself because it knows God, who is pure light and who enlightens the conscience. [From Keep It Simple]

Lends a whole new meaning to "Simple Christmas," doesn't it?



I don't know when I first wrote the words above, or when I first read that quote. This morning, I don't have the energy to dig around and find the original post. I'm tired. It's a good tired, but it's way tired. Yesterday, after a whirlwind week of traveling with lots of moving parts, we were {mostly} all together to witness this: Patrick, giving thanks after celebrating an NCAA Championship win.



I've got a lot to say about this unfolding of events. I'm astounded by God's graciousness and the people who allowed Him to use them to breathe such blessings into our days. For now, though, I'm very much aware that it's 10 days until Christmas, I'm still not home, and 85% of my shopping remains to be done.

I am also aware that my family just experienced an extraordinary joy. Really, truly, there's just nothing more to be purchased, wrapped, or tied with a bow. We can't ask for more. We're filled to the brim with all that's good.

We might be just a tad delirious.



#LivingtheLiturgy: A Splendor of Peace



THINK

"A seed contains all the life and loveliness of the flower, but it contains it in a little hard black pip of a thing which even the glorious sun will not enliven unless it is buried under the earth. There must be a period of gestation before anything can flower.

"If only those who suffer would be patient with their earthly humiliations and realize that Advent is not only the time of growth but also of darkness and hiding and waiting, they would trust, and trust rightly, that Christ is growing in their sorrow, and in due season all the fret and strain and tension of it will give place to a splendor of peace." --Caryll Houselander, *The Reed of God*

PRAY

Lord, you know the fret and strain and tension of my life. You understand it far better than I do. Grant me patience with it, God. And please grant me patience with myself. I look with hopeful eagerness to the splendor of your peace.

ACT

Plant a Christmas amaryllis today. It won't bloom in time for Christmas, but it will bloom and you can practice patience in the waiting.



Helping Children be Merry

It is generally acknowledged that the holiday season can be difficult for adults. This time of year, headlines at the newsstands tout all sorts of ways to “bust stress.” Ironically, one of the suggestions is often to look at the holiday through “the eyes of a child.” But holidays can be very stressful for children, too.

Consider the child who is anxious about whether or when he will see an estranged parent. Consider the child whose parent has an addiction. Consider the shy child who would really prefer to stay at home with only his immediate family. Consider the child who likes his routine. Consider the child with autism, sensory integration, or other neurological challenges. The hullabaloo and the expectations of the season only accentuate the very real stresses that exist for these children.

My favorite parenting author, Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, writes in *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles*, “Stress sneaks up on us, and as a result we often don't even realize it's taking its toll. Kids never say, ‘Gee, Mom or Dad, I'm really hurting.’ Instead they throw tantrums, hit their siblings or the neighbor kids, forget their homework, start having toileting accidents... complain of headaches and stomachaches and refuse to sleep in their own bed or go upstairs alone.”

“And to make matters worse, 90% of their stress is tied to our own.”

Children sense our tension. We compound it with disruptions in routines, sleep deprivation, and all sorts of poor eating adventures. And, though we certainly don't set out to, we put pressure on them, too. They know they are supposed to be happy and they are troubled when the party that is supposed to be fun is really very trying. They know they are supposed to behave especially well in front of Great Aunt Hilda and instead they have a total meltdown.

Kurcinka writes, “Holidays and traveling are supposed to be fun, which is why the stress they create can sneak up on you. You want to ignore it. You're supposed to be having fun, but the disruption of routines, guests and new foods can raise stress levels quickly and leave you in full view of all of the relatives or the public at large dealing with a kid flooded with cortisol.”

Is there a child in your family who is especially sensitive to his environment, who is more perceptive, needs more structure, feels more intensely? That's the child who needs your care even more this time of year. Is there a child in your neighborhood who is missing a divorced parent right now? Who is wondering if the adult in his life can stay sober through December? He's dreading Christmas. What can you do to help the littlest of God's children to really experience the joy of the season?

Kurcinka suggests that during times of stress we need to:

1. Nurture more and to recognize the child's need to be nurtured. For a child of your own, this might mean being especially attuned to what is important for his own calm. Does he absolutely need ten hours of sleep at night? Make no exceptions; guarantee sleep. And rub his back at the end of the day, ensuring he will drift off peacefully. Is the huge family gathering and the peppering of questions more than his shy, sweet mind can manage? Limit yourself to smaller gatherings, rehearse responses, and rescue him when he's cornered by well-meaning relatives and blushing a deep crimson that puts Santa's suit to shame. Be there. Hold him. If he's an infant or a toddler, hold him almost all the time. Rock and sing. Rock and read. If he's older, sit and cuddle in the quiet with a good Christmas story.

Limit television. It's far too easy to plug a child in so we can go get "something productive" accomplished. This works against us. The child is now wired and he's not feeling nurtured. We've pushed him away and we've fueled his stress with a medium that usually does little or no good for a needy child. Let some of your own expectations of appearances go in order to be very available to your child.

Kurcinka writes: "Stress disrupts our basic sense of security, and your child needs you to help her feel secure, just like you did when she was a baby. And she needs you to do it proactively... Proactively means recognizing the stress behaviors and the situations that cause stress for your family and consciously making the decision to slow things down and nurture more... Little things such as asking your child to help, or offering to carry him before he asks you to. It's essential that you offer support before your child asks for it because by doing so you allow him to make the decision: "Yes, I need support right now," or "No, I can do this on my own." He feels empowered and secure.

As you work with your child take the time to savor his presence. Revel in the memories of your child's infancy... Absorb the joy he finds in being with you. These small, thoughtful actions and words will communicate loudly and clearly to your child, "I am here. I am available. You can trust that I will not abandon you in your distress."

There are children whose parents cannot nurture. They are not physically present or they are emotionally unable. Look for those children in your life. Offer to bake with them, include them in a family meal, share a good book, be a safe haven. The child will absorb the nurturing environment in your house. He will feel safe. And to some degree, he will take the safe feeling with him. Make a particular effort to include those children when you are doing something faith-based. Something as simple as watching your family light an advent wreath can inspire in the child a lifetime desire to live the liturgical year. There is no greater gift you can give than to nurture a child whose own parents cannot.





2. Create stability and predictability where you can.

You know the rituals of every day life that are important to your children. Make sure they don't get pushed aside for a whole season of special occasions. A story every night at bedtime becomes even more important when it is the trigger for a good night's sleep after an over-extended day. Post a calendar and talk about the plans for Advent and Christmas. Count down days to events and be certain that the child knows exactly what is coming and when. Remember, they don't hold the iCal app; they are not masters of their own time. And they are completely at your mercy to know what comes next and how to cope.

3. Create rituals that connect you.

This is a beautiful season of rituals. As Catholics, our holy mother, the Church, has blessed us with a treasure chest of rituals and traditional celebrations of feasts. Don't do them all. Instead, choose wisely. Do only those things which will bring you closer to each other and closer to God. Your goal is to connect to your child and to share the wonder of the Christ Child. Keep that goal at the forefront. Take the Blessed Mother as your role model. Make it a season of nurturing and gentle kindness and let the children come to you for safe haven and holy passage.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Patience with All Things



Have patience
with all things,
but chiefly have patience
with yourself.



THINK

"Have patience with all things, but chiefly have patience with yourself. Do not lose courage in considering your own imperfections, but instantly set about remedying them - every day begin the task anew." – St. Francis de Sales

PRAY

I am my own worst critic, Lord. My own worst enemy. Help me to discern my own imperfections and to remedy them without scrupulosity or self-loathing.

ACT

Before each task today, ask for time, strength, and grace sufficient to do it cheerfully and for the glory of God.



Advent Anew

I hate to drive. It's no secret around here. I've never ever liked to drive. As a matter of fact, I failed my driver's test the first time--I couldn't get out of the parking lot. It was an icy January day and when we got to DMV, my dad suggested that I back into a space with no ice so that when I went out to take the test, I'd be sure not to slip. When I went to the car with the examiner, the first thing he said was "Pull in there." THERE was an empty, icy space, where he wanted me to pull in and back out. As I said, I never left the parking lot. The epitome of sixteen-year-old humiliation. And I was scarred for life. I hate to drive.

But my weekends are pretty much spent behind the wheel of a ginormous van. I pick up. I drop off. I drive through. Ballet, basketball, soccer, birthday parties, and around and around. Happy, smiling children doing their "things" with a mom who is clearly out of her element getting them there. Last Saturday, I got in the van at 9 AM and I arrived home, finished with the driving, at 5:30.

The one bright spot in my weekend drive-fest is the time I always manage to squeeze in at the craft store. This is MY time (well, mine and Karoline's). Craft stores smell wonderful, don't they? A lovely combination of eucalyptus and paper and sweet smelling paint. I'm pretty sure that's what Martha Stewart smells like. Karoline has learned to clap and grin when I settle her into the cart at Michael's. We chat the whole way through the store. (A benefit to having a baby--people no longer wonder at the crazy lady talking to herself in the craft store. Now they are amused by the the lady who talks to her baby.)

On this particular Saturday, I was there to buy wooden letters spelling "grateful" to paint in autumnal colors and sprinkle with "diamond dust" to decorate my mantel for Thanksgiving. Karoline and I started our familiar routine with the cart outside the store, but we pulled up short inside. From where in the world did all these people come? And why are they here? In my space? My Saturday refuge? Why is my craft store so crowded? I felt myself becoming overwhelmed. And annoyed. Really, really annoyed. Suddenly the aisles were crammed with Christmas stuff and there were people everywhere.

Ugh. The beginning of cheesy season. Now, there were going to be more people out and about on Saturdays, more traffic in which to drive, and even the craft store was going to be inundated. It would surely become the bastion of Advent gluttony. Excess commercialism everywhere, an overindulgence of "stuff." Christmas way before time for Christmas. Determinedly, I found my letters and my paint and I talked to Karoline about Thanksgiving. I found sketchbooks on sale and added them to my cart. And then it happened.

As I rounded the corner to go up the far aisle I heard a teenaged girl say to her mother, "Only 44 more days until Christmas. I'm so excited." The hair rose on the back of my neck. Forty-four days. Forty-four days to find a suitable picture of eight children together and make a Christmas card, then write a letter, address those envelopes and get the cards out. Make the gift list. Make the handmade gifts. Spend a weekend at Nutcracker performances. Bake the cookies, trim the tree, find dress shoes for the little boys. Forty-four days to wrap it all, retrieve Michael from college, find something to wear to accompany my husband to the office party. And oh, 44 days to impress upon my children that advent is a holy, spirit-filled season of preparation and not just one long-cheesy Christmas commercial. Bah humbug.

And then it happened. Ahead of me a silver pine tree with fluorescent pink bulbs belted out a tinny Christmas tune. And my baby turned to see. Her eyes lit up and the pink lights were reflected in her face. Her whole body began to sway to the "music." She tried to sing. I couldn't move past the tree. She just strained to see it around me.

So I stopped. And I watched her. She was completely enchanted. I remembered that this is all very new to sweet Karoline. All of it. When we unwrap our nativity sets, she'll see them for the first time. When we decorate gingerbread houses, she'll glue candy with sugar for the first time. When we sing carols, the tunes of old songs will be new to her. When we go into the Shrine in the dark of Christmas Eve and catch our breaths when the lights come up, she'll ... probably be asleep. But still, it's Christmas for a small child in my house this year. And even the cheesiest of tin trees looks beautiful reflected in her eyes. I can do this. I can do better than just survive during Advent. I have 44 days to prepare, to bring the spirit of the infant Lord into my home. To make all things ready for the birth of a baby. I know how to do that. All I need to do is keep my eyes on the baby. And she will remind me again and again that it's about the Baby. A little child will lead.

The teenaged girl said it again, more urgently this time. Forty-four days.

"Bring it on," I said aloud to myself (or to my daughter;-).





#LivingtheLiturgy: Yours are the Hands



THINK

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,

no hands but yours,

no feet but yours,

Yours are the eyes through which to look out

Christ's compassion to the world

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about

doing good;

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.”

— St. Teresa of Avila

PRAY

I am yours, Lord. Use my hands and feet today. Give me eyes that see with Christ's compassion.

ACT

Offer to help someone today: wrap gifts, bake cookies, fold laundry. Someone needs your help. You can spare the time. God multiplies time like He does loaves and fishes. Trust that you can be His hands and feet for someone else and still do what is His will for you in your own life.



A Carriage Ride with God

We are being bombarded by messages. Bombarded. We hear that we have X number of shopping days left until Christmas; buy, buy, buy. We hear that this is the season to be jolly; smile, smile, smile. We hear that we must decorate, plan, purchase, bake, cook, clean and entertain. And we also hear that we must prepare and pray.

The message most women hear is that they are the conductors of the beautiful Christmas symphony. If they mess up, if they falter, if they forget something, Christmas will be a chaotic cacophony of discordant noise. Women hear that everyone's Merry Christmas is up to them.

It's not. It's up to God.

We take on so many things that aren't within our control. Despite our best efforts, we really can't control everyone's good time. We can't ensure that there will be no disappointments under the tree. We can't make it so that no one feels lonely or left out or lost. Certainly, we can make our lists and we can do our best to tie pretty bows on boxes of joy. We can and should pray that Advent will bring us and everyone close to us closer to Jesus. But we have to let go of the idea that the weight of the world really is on our shoulders.

Imagine New York City at Christmastime — the pretty part of New York. See those horse-drawn carriages with brightly wrapped boxes piled high? When you climb into that carriage, do you hold those bags and boxes on your shoulders or above your head? Do you bear the full weight of them? Or do they sit beside you on the seat? Imagine for a moment that God is that horse-drawn carriage. He is going to carry you and all your stuff. Whether you choose to put it down beside you and let Him carry the full load or you hold it, exhausting yourself, while still, He's bearing the full weight, is entirely up to you. Really, He's got it; you don't have to carry it.

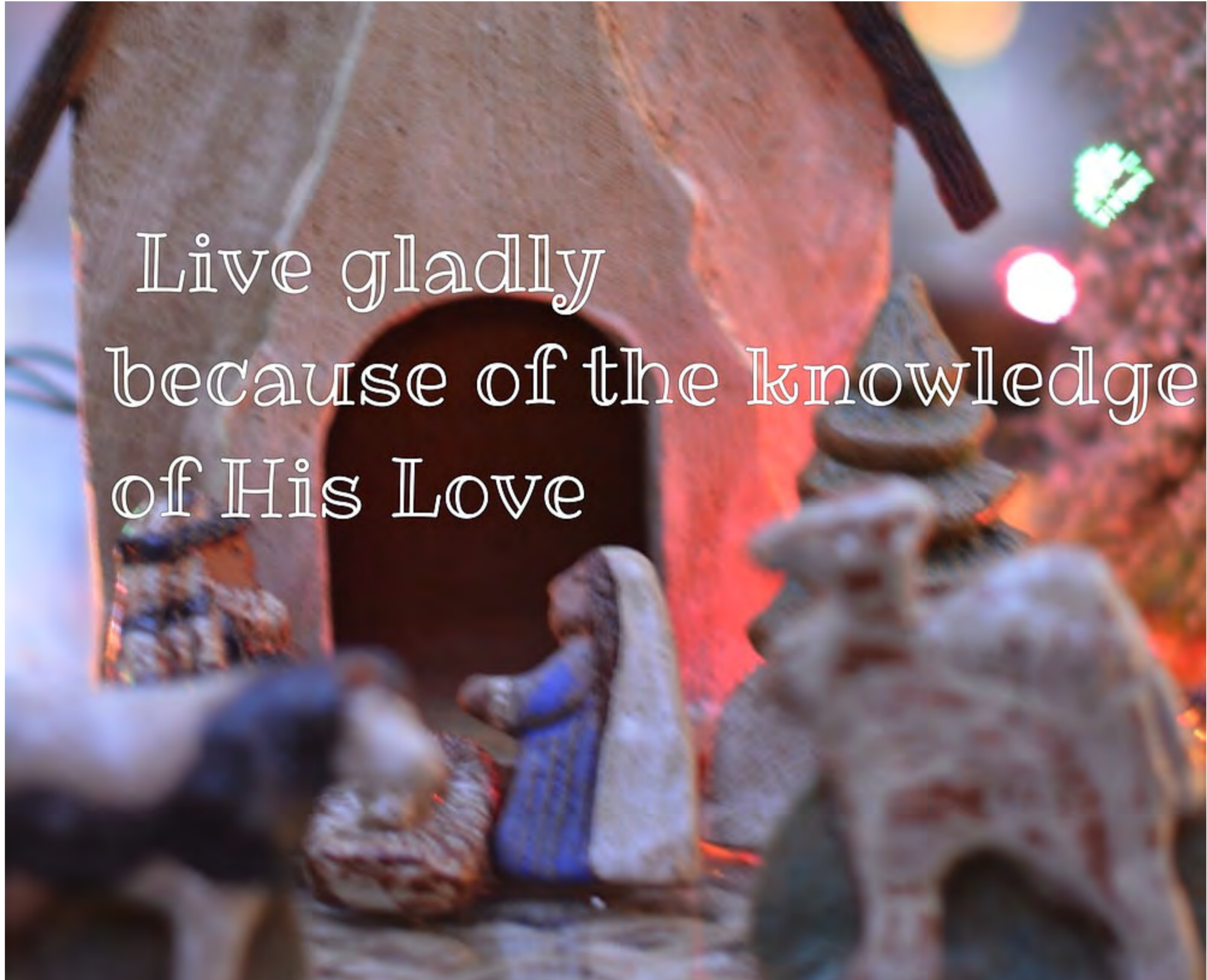
In her excellent book, *Grace for the Good Girl*, Emily Freeman writes, “The amount of crazy it would take for a girl on a carriage ride to keep the bag strapped to her shoulder is equal to the amount of crazy I am when I refuse to trust the Lord to handle my worries.”

He says to us, “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mt11:28). The only way we are going to find a peaceful place to pray this Advent is to let Him carry the burdens — to fully trust Him with them — and to rest in His peace. Of course, this plan requires that we look hard at what we're expecting of ourselves and at what is troubling us.

I think this time of year is most difficult for those women who try so hard all year long to be “good girls” — to do all the right things and to work hard to make people happy. The reality is that this Advent can be a time of true spiritual growth for good girls if we keep that carriage in mind. God is gracious. He already came as a tiny baby in a humble stable to lay down His life for us. He doesn't need us to be towers of strength and efficiency in order for it to be Christmas. He needs us to acknowledge our weaknesses and to recognize His power is made perfect in them. The best gift to give this season? Give up. And just give it all to God.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Live Gladly!



THINK

The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of His love. ~ St. Julian of Norwich

PRAY

Baby Jesus, let me live gladly. Give me a cheerful outlook And help me to smile with joy because I know I am loved by you.

ACT

Be joyful, truly cheerful today. And if, at first, you are not genuinely cheerful, pretend you are. Live, as if. Go about your daily round today greeting and caring for people as if you have all the time in the world to be happy with them.



Love Languages of Advent

This year, things are a little different.

For many years, since the advent of the epic Advent unit, about 15 years or so ago, Advent has been pretty much the same--lots of traditions, done year after year. We have added a few new ones, winnowed some ones that don't work, but mostly, things have stayed the same. This year, life has called for shaking things up a bit.

Last year, during Advent, I did the usual thing: I baked and I made candy and every feast, it seemed, had some sort of food attached. This is (was?) for me, as old as life itself. I come from a long line of Italian cooks who will tell you that food is a love language. I love to cook and bake; I'm good at improv and creativity in the kitchen.

But last year, words from another place came ringing into my head. I remembered an old friend telling me how hard it was for her to even plan meals for her family because she saw food as an enemy. It wasn't her imagination: food--certain (many) types of food--was making her sick. I remembered those words, because Advent made me sick last year.

Sugar, dairy, wheat--they make me sick and even though I try to deny it and I try to offer those long-loved food experiences for my children, I have to admit, they're really better off with fewer cookies and candy and pasta and cannolis if that means a healthy mom by Christmas Eve. I can't have even a little bit and lots of little bits over the course of a month are downright dangerous. So, this year things are a little different. The old familiar box of books has come up from the basement just as it always does. I think about the things we've done with these books and resolve that we're going to put most of the food-related ones aside this year. Instead, we'll just love the stories. Creating with food isn't happening here.

This year, my older children are needing my attention in ways I didn't anticipate. I am torn between creating a brand new set of poinsettia fairies with my littlest girls, because I want them to have everything the others had, and acknowledging that what I really want and need is to create anew.

This year, I have come to face to face with the fact that the best Christmas gift I ever received is feeling acutely the pangs of being the youngest boy, as his brothers move up and away, and everything that was dear and familiar seems to be threatened. I see in that still-round face that moments of little boy in this home are very few indeed. I see that he misses his dad, who is traveling both for work and with the big boy. I see that he needs me to figure a way to make these moments, right now in this crushingly busy season, matter for him.

I don't even want to bake this year, so tired am I of fighting with food. I'm not very inspired with old, familiar crafts. But I am compelled to create with my hands. And I am seeking peace and order in a world that seems suddenly chaotic to me. So is Nicholas.

I promised Nicholas in September that we would take a quilting class together. I knew that it was an act of craziness for me to assent to making two quilts--our first two ever--during November and December. But when Deborah made me an offer I couldn't refuse, I told Nick he'd have a handmade quilt, sewn by him, by the first day of winter, which just happens to be his birthday. I planned for him to make a simple patchwork quilt and for me to make the sampler quilt for the class. From the first moment of the first word of the first page of her book, Deborah has almost magically inspired self-confidence in me. Crazy as it was, I made that promise to my boy. My last little boy.

I tried to tell myself that there would be mellow, firelit afternoons of sewing with my children while someone read picture books nearby. Truth be told, there has been some of that. There have also been hours of Sarah and Karoline taking full advantage of the nativity sets in the room that became The Quilt Room to reenact The Nativity for us again and again and again. There has been a full teaching of a "Twelve Days of Christmas" dance (cousins beware; it's coming your way on Christmas Day). There have been lots of chatter and not a few math and design lessons as we watched tutorials and learned together.

In the interest of full disclosure, there have been a broken seam ripper and far too many coins added to the cuss jar (by me). There has been a perpetual mess while I neglected routine household things and instead cut fabric and thread into tiny bits to be scattered throughout the house. Several times, I'd cut or sew and Mary Beth would sit there with me, taking dictation while I made lists of all the other things I have to do. And quite a bit of online shopping has been accomplished while I wait for the iron to heat. There have been a few tears. And once, I literally reached up and pulled my hair out. We've worked through this process together. I kept my promise. Because promises are important.

My quilt is nearly pieced--all it needs is a border. The fabric arrived yesterday. I've learned enough in that process to dedicate another post to my quilt. Maybe I'll write about it after Christmas. Maybe I'll finish it after Christmas. It's the children's quilt I'm thinking of today.

The children's quilt is finished. And I'm very glad I put theirs first. It was a happy scene to see them all kneeling on that quilt, pin-basting it together. It was amazing to see even Karoline take a turn quilting it, and to see Nicholas allow his sisters a part in the making of his quilt. It was very good to do this project together, even though I was beginning to feel like it was consuming our days and keeping us from the peaceful pursuit of calm. In the end, that quilt has stitched us together a little bit.

There are some big things happening in our house this month, things that change lives and things that cause happy stress, but stress nonetheless. I have been drawn out of this house way more than I've liked--to three-times-a-week therapy sessions for my elbows, to office parties, to college visits, to all sorts of big kid tasks. And I've missed my little ones, worried about my baby (who isn't a baby at all) and fretted over the little boy who seems to have been left behind as his heroes conquer the world. We haven't been baking and we haven't made candy and really, it hasn't been feeling quite like Advent for me. When I'm home, I'm sewing and I'm sewing in their midst and often with them. But I've been gone. A lot.

Yesterday, I was on my way home from doctor and grocery store, dropping kids off before leaving again. I was talking with Colleen in the van, sitting in my driveway. I cannot talk on the phone in the house because I can't hold the phone. My elbows won't allow me that motion. The new van has a hands-free option, so the only time I talk on the phone is when I'm in the van without children. Not very often;-). Mary Beth came running out to the van and told me to come inside right away. She was insistent.

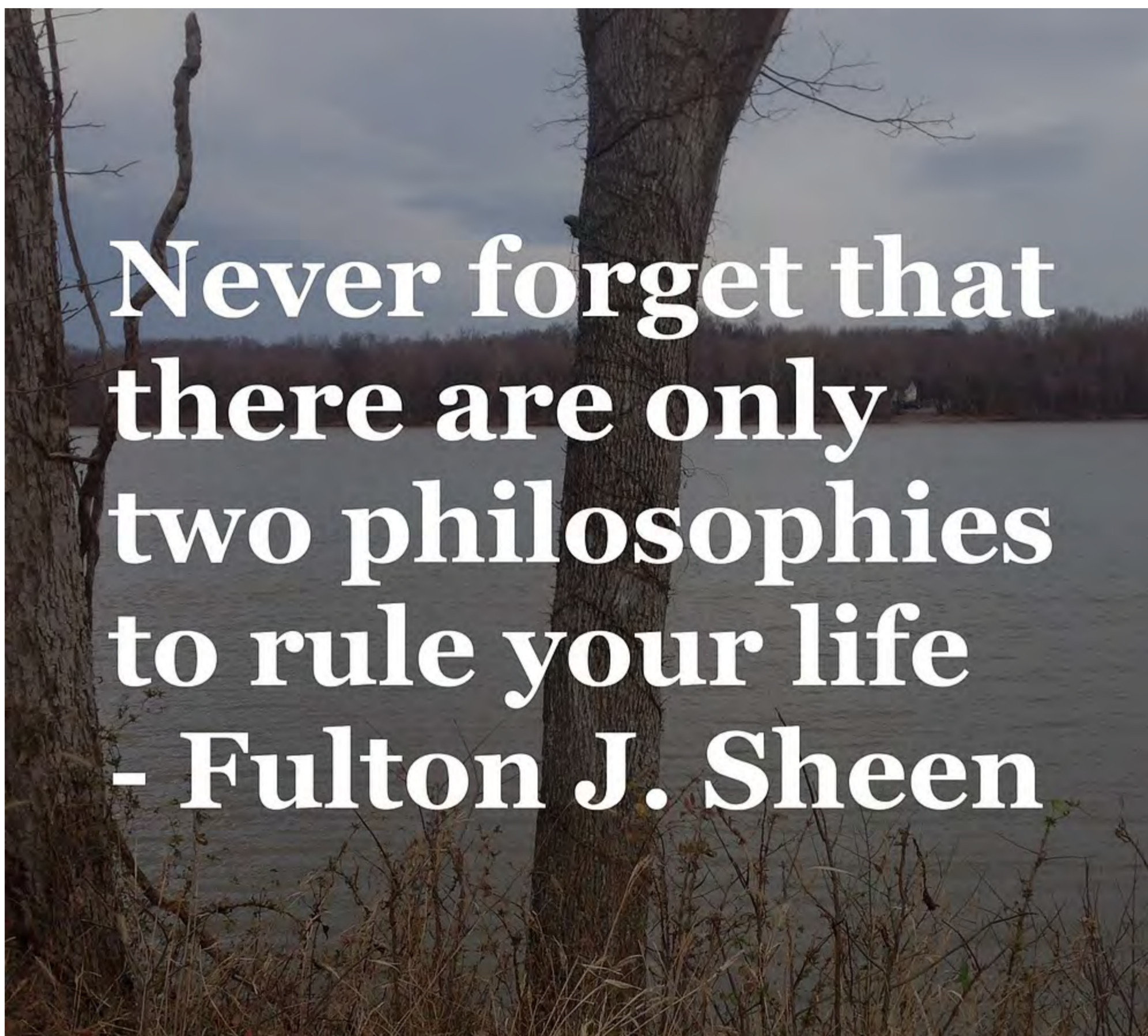
Sarah had spent the morning cranky and miserable, up way too late the previous night because I'd been with Mike at an office party. Everyone paid for her fatigue the next day. Nicholas, trying to comfort her, had gathered Katie and Sarah and a book under his quilt. He read and read and read. And then, Sarah fell asleep, wrapped in the quilt. That was what Mary Beth wanted me to see: Sarah asleep on a handmade quilt while Nicky read *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. I don't have a picture of her asleep. Mary Beth thought to take one earlier, but at the book's end, she and I just stood and watched them until the story sighed happily ever after. These sweet little girls at the end of the line; I worry sometimes that they are not getting the energy and enthusiasm and undivided attention that a young mom would bring. But there they were, with one of the most beloved of our family books, listening to my littlest boy--their big brother--read a version my eldest received for his First Communion, an Advent 17 years ago..

...all snuggled beneath our newest Advent tradition--a quilt they made together.





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Let's Avoid the Headache**



**Never forget that
there are only
two philosophies
to rule your life
- Fulton J. Sheen**



THINK

“Never forget that there are only two philosophies to rule your life: the one of the cross, which starts with the fast and ends with the feast. The other of Satan, which starts with the feast and ends with the headache.” --Fulton Sheen

PRAY

Sweet Jesus, remind me that the empty places in my life can only be filled with you, not with Christmas cookies.

ACT

Are you stress eating? Reaching for the sugar and the carbs because they are there and you are tired more than hungry? Don't do that! Let today be a fast day. Eat two small meals and a modest dinner. Eat no sugar. Go for a walk or take a nap (or both).



Quick! Lock the Door!

We decorated the house for Christmas on the Saturday between Thanksgiving and the first Sunday of Advent. I know there is a debate about whether or not the house should be decorated early in the Advent season, little by little during the Advent season, or late on Christmas Eve. I have long since settled the debate in my own mind. In our family, we do it early.

I've prepared for nine babies, and I've always nested early. To have everything in order in the home to which the baby will come brings me peace. I'm able to slow down, to focus on the birth, to better prepare siblings, when I'm not distracted by the work that there is to do to prepare the environment. The waiting bassinet, the freshly folded baby towels, the layette ready and waiting in dresser drawers—all cause my heart to quicken as I wait through those last few weeks, great with expectation. And so it is with Christmas.

An Advent wreath, nativity sets, a brightly lit Christmas tree all sing to us that a wonderful event is coming. Soon and very soon! The Christmas books (all four baskets of them) are sorted and ready to read in an order that builds expectation, leading to the crescendo of the holy night. My children are ready to get ready—they know that these three weeks are filled with traditions of preparation.

But what about me? I know that I will do, do, do in order to arrive at Christmas ready to celebrate in the midst of a large familial crowd. But my soul is calling for something else. My soul is saying to rest, to be still, to sit in the glow of those twinkling lights and just stare long and often at the manger before me. My soul wants Advent to be about pregnant waiting.

There is not a lot of bustle in those last weeks before birth. I couldn't bustle if I wanted to. There is so much to do! I know, though, that the most important thing to do is to seek and find the Christ child in the season set aside for pondering His infant presence. And so, the bustle in these last weeks must also be peaceful, purposeful and soulful. It is essential to the very life of me that there be just as many (more?) moments of stillness and silence as there are moments of busyness and bustle.

I am reminded by St. Anselm to put aside the weighty and the wearisome. His words set the tone for me this season and they are words I will revisit every morning to remind myself not to squander this time set aside by the Church. I am not of this world. Though I seek to be light in this world and I will be gracious and hospitable amidst its incessant though vague "seasonal" demands, I am called urgently only to be at peace with the Baby in the manger. That is the most pressing "need"—the real need. St. Anselm writes:

"Come now, insignificant man, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for him and having locked the door seek him out. Speak now, my whole heart, speak now to God: 'I seek your countenance, O Lord, your countenance I seek.' Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you... Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you."

Abandon myself for a little. Rest for a little. I think I can lock the door and be quiet "a little" every day. And I think that we will all be better for it.



#LivingtheLiturgy:

You were made in the image of the Creator



THINK

"If you want God, and long for union with him, yet sometimes wonder what that means or whether it can mean anything at all, you are already walking with the God who comes. If you are at times so weary and involved with the struggle of living that you have no strength even to want him, yet are still dissatisfied that you don't, you are already keeping Advent in your life. If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is somehow better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve or desire, that the touch of God in your life stills you by its gentleness, that there is a mercy beyond anything you could ever suspect, you are already drawn into the central mystery of salvation.

Your hope is not a mocking dream: God creates in human hearts a huge desire and a sense of need, because he wants to fill them with the gift of himself. It is because his self-sharing love is there first, forestalling any response or prayer from our side, that such hope can be in us. We cannot hope until we know, however obscurely, that there is something to hope for; if we have had no glimpse of a vision, we cannot conduct our lives with vision. And yet we do: there is hope in us, and longing, because grace was there first. God's longing for us is the spring of ours for him." -- Maria Boulding

PRAY

Increase my faith, Lord. Make me more aware that things really are somehow better, greater, and more wonderful than I deserve.

ACT

Take a walk outside today, no matter the weather. Breathe deeply. Be very aware of your surroundings: the sun on your face, the cool of the air, the crunch of the snow, perhaps? Notice. Notice every little detail the Artist has left for you to see. Isn't it more wonderful than you think you deserve? Now fix yourself a cup of something warm and just sit and look at the Christmas tree. Squint a little and let the lights twinkle merry over the imperfections. Aren't you made in the image of your Creator, you mama who makes things wonderful for your children?

(Psst: Share the image at the top of the page with a mother who could use some encouragement on what is likely a very weary day.)



The Light is on for You

As we approach the Holy Night, what our hearts and minds and bodies want most is to be awash in the peace that passes understanding. What we really, really put at the top of the Christmas list is to wake up Christmas morning bathed in grace. Imagine: your feet hit the floor Christmas morning and your heart sings. You are rested and ready for a beautiful day.

Impossible? Not really.

You've been intentional this Advent. Hopefully, you've drawn closer to Christ and you've nurtured yourself. Let's make sure we do one more thing. Let's open ourselves to grace—a pure infusion of golden grace that will light and warm these days.

Let's get rid of the dank deadweight that is sin.

Let's go to confession.

When the Lord gives us the sacrament of reconciliation, He offers a beautiful channel of grace. We are all sinners. We all have limitations and shortcomings and that nasty tendency towards sin. We also all have the deep desire to run into the outstretched arms of the Forgiving Father and beg Him to make us whole.

We can open our hearts wide to Him and tell Him anything without fear.

Wait, what? The truth is, lots of us feel more than a little fear when we approach the confessional. We see the door and the screen and we know that on the other side is another human being who is going to hear the worst of us. When we look with human eyes at the material setting, it's a scary thing.

Instead, look at the confessional with the eyes of your soul. See the outstretched arms and the open heart of Christ. It's not an easy thing to get beyond the idea of a priest listening to our raw, unedited sin. Remember that priests rejoice in hearing a good confession. They know that God is in it; God has moved that moment.

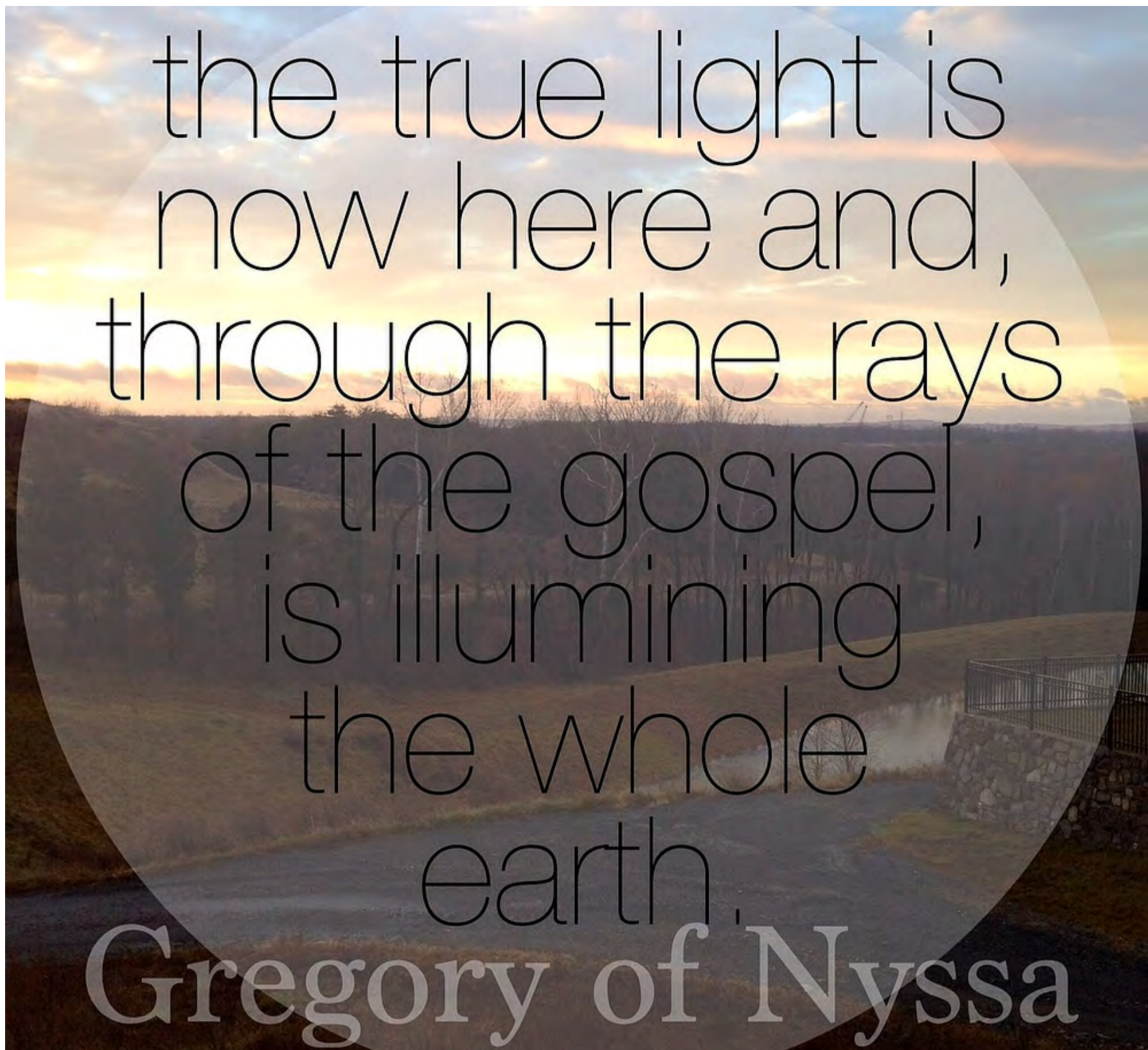
Jesus waits patiently in the confessional to hear your whispered anguish. He wants to absolve you and to bring you into the light of His Christmas joy. If you are able, spend a few minutes in front of the crèche before moving to the confessional. See that life is real there. An anxious, exhausted husband waits there, valiantly trying to provide for his family. A weary young mama, far from home will heroically move herself to bring life into the world. It's dirty there. It's a little chaotic, too. He allowed Himself to be born into our mess. He already knows the mess we are.

Move towards the confessional. Lay down your burden. Let it all go.

Let grace wash over your upturned face.



#LivingtheLiturgy: True Light



THINK

"Today the darkness begins to grow shorter and the light to lengthen, as the hours of night become fewer... Realize that the true light is now here and, through the rays of the gospel, is illuminating the whole earth."-Gregory of Nyssa

PRAY

The day is short, Lord. Don't let me waste a moment of it.

ACT

Get up to see the sun rise. Enjoy the quiet, Take advantage of the extra time awake before the busy of the day. Make yourself a good breakfast. Almost there. It's almost time! (You can always plan for this one tomorrow;-)



Through Her Eyes: Christmas Gift

The days from the Solstice to Christmas Eve were among the darkest and coldest of my life. Tears were shed, apologies said. Hard won peace felt fragile. I stumbled into Christmas Eve morning in a typical melancholy fashion. I set about making the customary magic happen, all while feeling like an utter failure at just about everything that mattered. It was not a pretty place to be.

Our plan was to accompany Mike to Midnight Mass at the Basilica. Karoline had chattered all day about the "big church." Earlier this season, we had received a letter from our pastor encouraging us, among other things, to attend Mass at noon on Christmas Day in order to make Christ the center of the Christmas celebration. We've opted for Midnight Mass for several years now and one of the great blessings of that is that it brings the reason for the feast into sharp focus. We are Midnight Mass people. Karoline and Katie talked all day about going to the "big church."

I was exhausted. Sarah Annie has some wicked virus that sounds suspiciously like bronchitis. We're sharing it. My throat is sore. I've slept and eaten very little since that dark settled at the week's beginning. We hosted brunch for 18 people Thursday morning. I caught a quick nap putting Sarah to sleep. At dinner, just an hour before the pilgrimage was to begin, Mike said again that he could just take a few children with him (they'd be just fine while he worked) and I could stay home with the little ones. Michael, looking green around the gills, contemplated staying home as well. Maybe this just wasn't the year to do this big midnight thing.

I waffled. Katie cried. She wanted to go and she wanted me with her. Karoline announced she was going. We went. It is an hour's drive to the church. Mike needed to be there 2 1/2 hours early. Mass was two hours. Then it's an hour home in the wee hours of Christmas morning. This trek is a huge commitment. On the way there, I discussed strategy with Christian. We decided that I'd take the little girls and visit all the small chapels before Mass began, then I'd duck out with Sarah Anne and not even attempt to sit through Mass. He'd keep Karoline under his watchful care. Michael would take care of Katie. Paddy would be in charge of the little boys. I would spend Mass sitting quietly with my baby in the lower church. They would be together upstairs in the pew.

From the minute we arrived, Karoline was stuck to me like tenacious tinsel on tree. We went to the large nativity, where just an hour earlier, her Daddy had climbed inside and tenderly moved Joseph (to get a better shot--but still it touched me somehow that he was worried about Joseph). Been a rough week--doesn't take much to make me cry. At the sight of baby Jesus, Karoline's eyes grew wide. She dropped to her knees.

"Hi, Baby Jesus! It's me. Thank you for all the children in our family. Thank you for making Sarah Annie my little sister. I love you!"

And she was up, leaving the strangers who witnessed the moment with me to wipe their eyes.

It's Christmas.



I decided to try to stay in the upper church for Mass. Karoline wanted to be with me and I wanted her to see the beauty that is Christmas Eve with the Papal Nuncio. She was awed and both little ones were hushed for the candlelit procession. She knew the hymns and sang along. Paddy made sure she didn't catch her hair on fire with the candles. It was a bit stressful. Then the lights came up. And she and Sarah Annie chattered away while they took all the donation envelopes for the rack on the pew and "organized" them. We made it to the Kyrie. And then we walked that very long aisle from our reserved seats in front to the back of the church. Karoline wasn't leaving me for anything. Now I had them both.

We made our way to the crypt church. I knew I'd hear the music and know when to go back upstairs for communion. Slowly, I walked Karoline around the church, stopping at each mosaic to tell her about the saint depicted there. She spent a long time at the nativity, patting the nearby sheep and begging to touch baby Jesus. We saw St. Elizabeth. And St. Anne holding the Blessed Mother with a book to read. We stopped to say a prayer with St. Joseph. Then, we were at the center of the back of the church. "Jesus is here too, Karoline," I whispered, "really here in the Tabernacle."

"In the gold box?" she asked.

I nodded.

She dropped to her knees. I stood in awed amazement.

"Thank you Jesus, for Sarah Annie. And especially thank you for giving me to my mommy. I love you, Jesus! Bye bye."

She was off to look at the next mosaic. I was rooted to the spot right there in front of that Tabernacle where the Baby and the King had just touched the tenderest part of my heart and healed the wounds He knew were there.

Yes, thank you Jesus. I love you, too.



The Christmas Fight. I remember this one well. Some of them I don't remember at all. But they happen. I have a friend who knows that when I am on vacation and I text "St. Joseph prayers," the inevitable vacation fight has unfurled. We are a fallen race and in the midst of all that is supposed to be happy, we crumple and argue with the people we love most in the world. It's a collision of stress and fatigue and feeling like we can't measure up no matter how hard we try.

Note to self: Stop Trying So Hard. God's got this. Now go be sweet.





#LivingtheLiturgy: We Need to Fall

**“if we did not fall,
we should not know
how weak and wretched
we are of ourselves,
nor should we know
our Maker's marvelous
love
so fully”**
- Julian of Norwich



THINK

“...we need to fall, and we need to be aware of it; for if we did not fall, we should not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker's marvelous love so fully...” -- Julian of Norwich

PRAY

God, as I look at my list of all I'd hoped to accomplish and I look at the wish lists of the people I love, I know I will fall short. Please help me to know just as confidently that You will step into the gap and You will provide all that we need to grow closer to living as your children.

ACT

No doubt, there are things you had hoped to do before Christmas and they remain undone. Strike them from your list right now. Watch how God steps into the void.



Grief

What if this Christmas looks nothing like you thought it would? What if—despite your every best intention—you are now two days until Christmas and you are just sad? What if this grief washes over you at the most unexpected moments and robs you of those pockets of joy that are promised by the twinkling lights of storefronts and the jangle of clever radio ads?

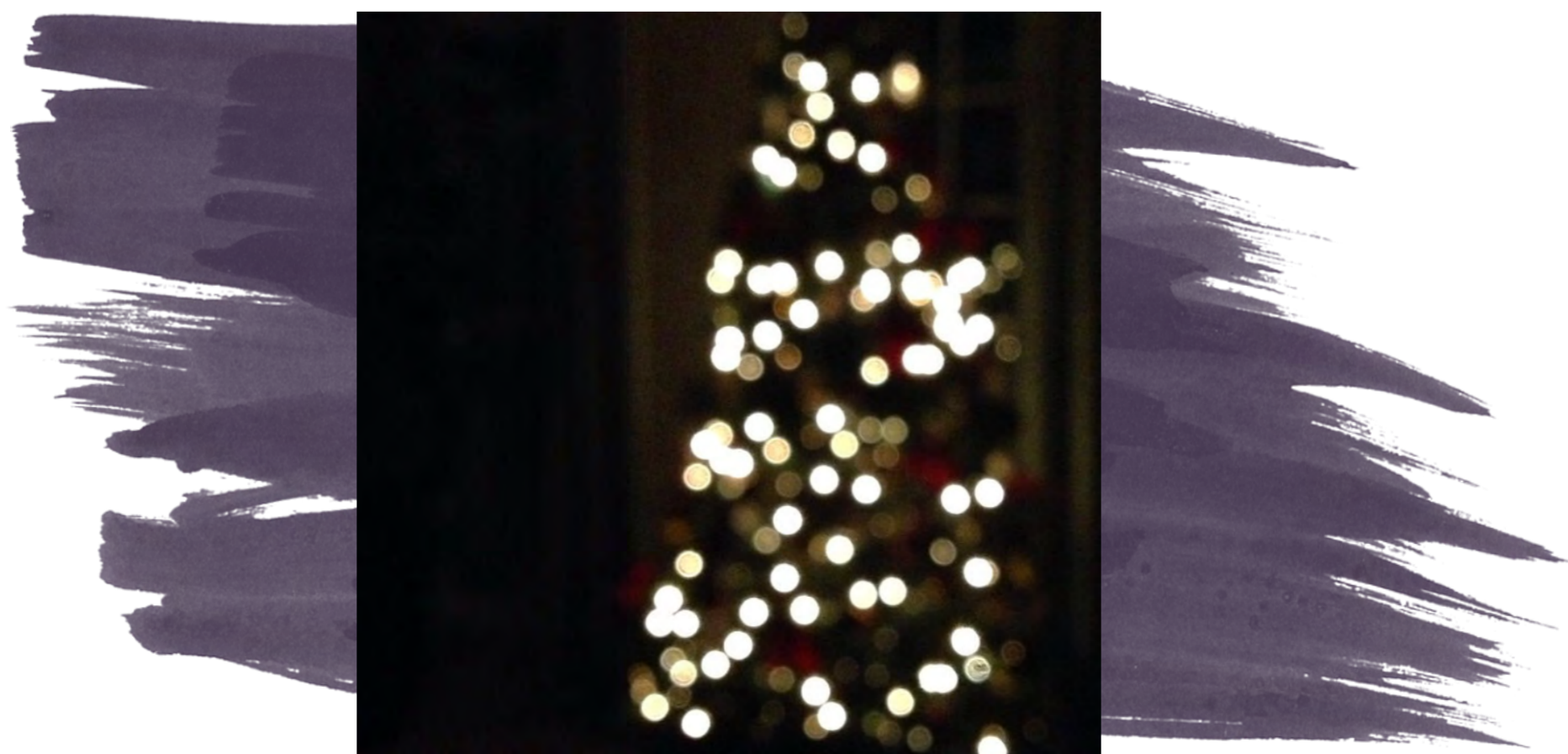
It cannot be denied that the Advent and Christmas season is often a season of deep, deep grief. From the child who wakes up Christmas morning in a family torn by alcoholism and divorce, to the sorrowful mother who comes to an Advent due date with empty arms, to the man at midlife who faces Christmas for the first time without his beloved father, the rosy notion of a season of joy often crashes hard into the stark reality of a life filled with rough crosses.

We grieve for what we wanted Christmas to be. We grieve our losses and our losses stand in stark relief against the gaiety of the season. The emphasis on family traditions and family gatherings make the absence (or the illness) of a family member more poignant and pronounced. When you always hung five stockings and now you only hang four, it's hard not to feel a rising sob every time that familiar mantel scene looks different.

Give grief a space in your Advent and Christmas. We grieve because we love. In the case of a family that lives with the chronic illness—emotional or physical—the anguish over what could have been and reality is a grief revisited every year. And some years are more difficult than others.

When we grieve someone who has died, the attachment we had to the person lost will dictate the depth and intensity of our pain. Healing will not be a linear process. Instead, each member of a family will grieve the same loss in a unique way. This means that in a family rocked by the loss of a loved one, a mother is struggling to process her own sorrow while also trying to reach her husband and children and comfort them. It's a lot to carry.

Don't try to dismiss sorrow in order to embrace the season of joy. None of us is able to truly grieve unless we allow ourselves (and our loved ones) to experience the sorrow that comes with loss. If we try to hide it or deny (or dull it with a couple extra glasses of wine), we prolong it and we dishonor it. We have to live the pain. Give yourself permission to befriend your grief. Don't fall prey to the very easy way to escape in this season: don't get yourself so busy that you numb your pain with activity.



Don't put unreasonable expectations on yourself or on family members who are also healing. Don't expect the season to look or feel the same. Don't force a fit this year. If you need to skip a tradition because it opens the wound and leaves it raw and bare, skip it. Be honest with your children about why this year things might look a little different. Give yourself space to say "no" to the usual celebrations and give your children the same space. Don't hunker down into a maudlin cave, but be sensitive and be open to changing something if it suits this season better than the tradition does.

And just as we don't force the celebration, we can be open to adapting it as well. I remember being a little skeptical at how well we'd taught the liturgical year when my son put up his first Christmas tree in his own house the week before Thanksgiving.

His wife explained, "When your best friend has terminal cancer and might not live until Christmas and your grandfather just died and your wife's grandfather just died, you want a little light. This tree brings light to our home and I don't really care what the date is." Ah. Makes sense to me.

Find a way to acknowledge someone who is missing. An ornament on the tree for the baby lost. A picture from a Christmas past framed and put in a place of honor with the promise to unpack it every year with heirloom decorations. An icon and a candle lit. Simple, tangible acknowledgements of the blessing and the loss give our eyes and our hearts a place to focus. Don't hide the grief. Honor it.

You can't escape grief. Even if you travel during the holidays because you can't bear to walk past that empty nursery one more time, the nursery goes with you. You will grieve in another setting and you will grieve again when you go home. If you leave for Christmas consider this: are you going to a place where you will be loved and supported in your loss or are you going to a place where you will be surrounded by strangers who don't recognize that the shadows in your eyes are the shape of someone dear? Surround yourself with people who shore you up and shoulder your cross.

Eulogies inspire us. There's nothing like listening to the impact a life has made on the people gathered to grieve it. Eulogies inspire us to live better, to love more. Gather your grief into resolve to love the people in your midst during this season. What does that look like for you? How can you honor the memory of what you have lost by loving harder and deeper and stronger?

Mourning is hard work. Don't put excessive expectations on yourself and give yourself plenty of time to rest. It's absolutely fine if you say "no" more frequently when you are saying "yes" to the grief that needs your attention. Give yourself permission to cry. Jesus wept. Tears can cleanse.

Tell someone. Even if it's way past the time when you think you should have be "over it," tell someone you are in pain. Let them in. Bless them by allowing them to console the sorrowing.

This year, let Christmas be a time of extreme forgiveness. This season of preparation, as we await the birth of the Savior, is the right time to prepare our hearts to be forgiven. Even in our grief, we can do that preparatory work. We begin by forgiving others; let go of the sorrow inflicted upon you by someone else. Let it go. Forgive it. Then, there is what might be the more difficult task. Forgive yourself. Let go of regret. If this is the only thing you do this year to welcome the Savior, you've done so much to embrace the true Gift. Jesus is ready and willing and waiting to bind your wounds and dry your tears. Ask Him to step into the gaping hole of your heart that is carved by regret. He redeems it. Only God can fill that hole. When you grieve, know that He is calling you to prayer. He is calling you for this holy thing: forgiveness.

Christmas isn't a Hallmark card. It isn't the syrupy specials on the Family channel. It's not. Really, it's not. Christmas is the coming of a savior into a dark and dirty stable--a baby beautiful who would live his brief life in poverty and persecution and die a terrible, ugly death in order to save us from our brokenness. It's not a gilded narrative wrapped in a bow. It's the story of heartbroken humanity redeemed by Hope himself.

Jesus came to end our suffering. He came to turn mourning into dancing. He came to make all things new.

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, '... There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"

Revelation 21:3-5

His story—the Christmas story—is the story of humility and greatness. It's the story of justice and mercy. It's the story death and new life.

It's the story written for the grief-stricken.





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
The Sweetest Thing in all My Life**



THINK

“The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing . . . to find the place where all the beauty came from.” C.S. Lewis

PRAY

Come Holy Spirit, create in me something beautiful. Even as my head and hands provide for beauty around me, please be the artist inside of me. Make me genuinely beautiful.

ACT

We set about our tasks today, making homes beautiful, packages beautiful, meals beautiful, children beautiful. We are all about bringing the beauty of Christmas into the holiness of the evening. It is work—making beauty is hard, hard work. In the weary, in the bone-tired, take a moment to sit in the twinkle of lights and see that it is good, this work of your hands. It is beautiful. And you have created a little taste of heaven. It’s not perfect. It’s not heaven—it’s just a sweet Christmas taste that leaves us all wanting more of Jesus.



Reflect Upon the Coming Joy

Every pregnancy changed me. Every newborn shaped me. None so much as the last.

The baby we expected in December was born in October. Her birth was traumatic and she spent some time in the newborn intensive care unit. She's home now, safe and happy in my arms. It was summer when bedrest began and now it's Advent. Somewhere along the way, I lost the last trimester of pregnancy and I gained an angelic baby. My house looks more than a bit neglected and I feel like I'm playing catch-up on life. This year, more than ever before, Advent is about the baby — both the one we are holding and the One we await. We know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our God is the God of miracles and we know that the Babe is the greatest Gift of all.

Usually, I spend several months preparing my home before a baby is born. Not this time. This time, six weeks before our baby was due, I hastened to the hospital in the middle of the night and hoped we'd both survive. Usually, the baby clothes are washed and tucked tenderly in drawers; the house is cleaned and the freezer is stocked. This time, my baby's skin was so tender she didn't even wear clothes the first few days of her life. Usually, I am busy and active in the weeks before delivery. Usually, my home is ready. This time, I was very still and contemplative. This time, my soul was ready.

Usually, I spend a month or so getting ready for Advent. And then I spend Advent getting ready for Christmas. Usually, there are crafts planned, lessons laid out and activities scheduled. Once Advent begins, there is decorating and gift buying and baking. Not this time. This time, I am working to get my feet solidly on the ground following bedrest and emergency surgery. Mostly, though, I am caring for a delicate baby and reveling in the miracle of her. This time, the contemplation continues. The prayer routines of pregnancy are all the more important as I seek to regain "real life."

I learned that as much as all those physical things bring comfort and joy to our days and as much as I dearly love to do all the wonderful things that come with this time of year, I truly prepare for the baby when I spend large amounts of time in prayer.

A couple of days before Sarah Anne was born, I commented to my priest that it is much more difficult to sin when one is on bedrest. He raised his eyebrows. No, I continued, maybe it's not the bedrest so much as it is the knowledge that at any moment I could hemorrhage and once the bleeding began, I could die. Indeed, nothing drives one to one's knees (figuratively, in my case) like knowing a serious medical situation lurks around the corner. Nothing makes avoiding sin seem more urgent than knowing the accounting could be quite near.

The reality, of course, is that none of us know what day is our last. None of us know when life might change suddenly and death might loom large. But few of us pray that way. Ever.

Advent is a time to reflect upon the coming joy, the sweet Baby in the manger. The Baby came so that we could die in peace. We don't often take Advent to reflect on that, though. We get caught in the bustle of the most wonderful time of the year.

Nothing is so precious as a baby. Nothing smells so sweet. No cheek feels so soft. Nothing brings us closer to Christ, closer to our Creator than to inhale the breath of a baby and wonder at the miracle.

Nothing except prayer.

Prayer allows us to communicate with God; prayer is the closest we come to heaven. If everything else fell away, we'd still have prayer. And I recently learned that that's all we really need. God provides the rest.





#LivingtheLiturgy: Merry Christmas!



THINK

This is the birthday of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the anniversary of the day on which the Day of Days was born to bring light into our day. It is a day we ought to celebrate... Our Christian faith alone can convey to us what this sublime act of humility gave to us. It is something that utterly escapes the understanding of unbelievers; because God has hidden these things from the wise and prudent... Let the humble, therefore, make God's humility their own. With help such as this, with this to carry, as it were, the burden of their weakness, they will arrive at the sublimity of God.

~ St. Augustine

PRAY

Thank you! That's all; just my heartfelt thank you, Jesus.

ACT

Spend at least a few moments of one-on-one, eye contact, quiet conversation with everyone who is with you today.





#LivingtheLiturgy: Take Good Care of Yourself



God is
always faithful
to his promises,
but he often
surprises us
in the way
he fulfills them.

POPE BENEDICT XVI



THINK

"God is always faithful to his promises, but he often surprises us in the way he fulfills them. The child that was born in Bethlehem did indeed bring liberation, but not only for the people of that time and place - he was to be the Saviour of all people throughout the world and throughout history. And it was not a political liberation that he brought, achieved through military means: rather, Christ destroyed death forever and restored life by means of his shameful death on the Cross. And while he was born in poverty and obscurity, far from the centres of earthly power, he was none other than the Son of God.

Out of love for us he took upon himself our human condition, our fragility, our vulnerability, and he opened up for us the path that leads to the fullness of life, to a share in the life of God himself. As we ponder this great mystery in our hearts this Christmas, let us give thanks to God for his goodness to us, and let us joyfully proclaim to those around us the good news that God offers us freedom from whatever weighs us down: he gives us hope, he brings us life."

~ Pope Benedict XVI

PRAY

Baby Jesus, I am human--frail, vulnerable, and all too easily disappointed. With all humility, I offer you my brokenness and my eternal gratitude for the Greatest Gift you've given to me.

ACT

Pajama day? Just stay comfy and cozy and focus on self-care today. A good run, a long soak in a warm tub, a quilt and a good book? What's your self-care go-to? Go to it.



On the Feast of St. Stephen

She wandered the aisles of the home goods store, weaving in and out through shelves of towels and tablecloths, stopping to pick up the latest gadget guaranteed to make kitchen life easier. Every once in a while, she'd put something in her basket, murmuring about how it was a great sale or it would be perfect in this room or that. She'd offered to come along with me on my mission and though I'd planned to come in, purchase one tablecloth large enough to fit my dining room table and only available at this store (not online), and quickly get out, we lingered a long time.

I'm not a fan of shopping. It's just not my jam. Tablecloth tucked safely in the basket, I began people watching. There was my friend, who was still wandering each aisle, searching. And there were others like her. It was just after Christmas. I had that overly full feeling that wasn't just digestive, but extended to my very being. We had so much stuff! What could we possibly need in this store on this day that would compel us to browse and fill carts again?

I watched the woman who'd accompanied me. She'd had a very difficult year. Her 8-year-old son was unhappy and unruly. Just getting him out the door to school every day was tricky business. Her husband was having an affair and she'd recently learned of his infidelity and asked him to leave. She was sad, lonely, and looking.

In the aisles of Bed, Bath, and Beyond, she was seeking something that would fill the holes and heal the hurts. Surely that teapot whistling happily at the stove every morning would make the day brighter. Maybe if she could look forward to curling up in that throw rug on her couch and pulling her boy close, she could heal his heart and restore to him the things his father took when he left. Maybe if she bought a new crockpot she'd be inspired to cook dinner every night the way she used to, back when he cheerfully did the dishes while she gave the kids their baths.

The days after Christmas—when the glut of stuff begins to get the better of us—can be sad ones. For some people, there is a restlessness, an emptiness and longing. There is a hole that still isn't filled.

These are days to linger long at the crèche. These are days to take advantage of the relative quiet in the world and find the places in our own hearts that can't be filled with stuff.

If our hearts are longing, they are longing for Him. And they are longing to be more like Him.

Instead of the near frantic move to acquire more material goods in the days after Christmas, let these be days to give more. Let these be days to love more. The best way to stir oneself from a sense of emptiness is to give.

The Church celebrates the Feast of St. Stephen today. Stephen, the first martyr, was also one of the early Church's first ministers on behalf of social justice. He organized meals to feed the poor.

It's a good day to plan for service. Can you invite a family to share a meal? Can you bring a meal to a family facing economic hardship? Can you gather into a pretty basket some thoughtful goodies that will bless a woman who might be feeling lonely even amidst her family? Sure, put some tea and a pretty cup in a box on this Boxing Day. Tie it with a lovely ribbon and give it. But, remember, it's not about the trinket given. It's about the heart you put in the box. Stop and talk with her. Fold a load of laundry for her. Promise to pray for her and do it.

You'll both be better for it.



**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Just Be**



THINK

"I don't drink or smoke, you know," he said irrelevantly, "because I think they're drugs. And yet I fancy all hobbies, like my camera and bicycle, are drugs too...Drugging myself with speed, and sunshine, and fatigue, and fresh air. Pedalling [sic] the machine so fast that I turn into a machine myself. That's the matter with all of us. We're too busy to wake up." --G. K. Chesterton

PRAY

Dear God, I always think that after Christmas Day, time will unfold in front of me and I will just luxuriate in its emptiness. And then the days invariably fill and I am once again swept away in the busyness of life. Stop me. Let me stop. Help me take these Days of Christmas and truly steep in your Holy Peace.

ACT

I've got nothing for you today. Don't do anything. Just be.



Home: It's worth it

The Christmas boxes are all carefully packed and tucked away until next November. Every year, I fight a little anxiety as I pack them away. "If I'm not here next year, will they know how to find everything? Will they remember where it all goes? Will they be able to make Christmas?" Of course, this anxiety has its root in the fact that I finished treatment for cancer just as the Christmas season closed 24 years ago. Even if it's not conscious, my mind goes there, always will go there, it seems.

The reality, to be clear, is that I don't make Christmas at all. Christmas is entirely the Lord's. But I consciously do bring its presence into our home. And then, when it is safely packed away, I set about intentionally to continue to make the Baby Jesus a part of our ordinary days.

The last of the pine needles are swept, the last ornament tucked away, the bright red boxed up and we are tidy and clean and a little bare. Honestly, I don't miss the red and green — they clash terribly with the walls and the furniture. I do, however, want to nest and to brighten the winter days after the feast. Inevitably, I buy flowers those first few weeks in January. It's an instinct built into my motherhood.

"To a young child, home stands for God. In it he learns to see and touch the gifts of God. If his mother is wise, she will make his home beautiful. She will copy the world's Creator and make a tiny new Eden. She will bring in flowers and give the child animals and feed the birds. The food on the table will be clean and simple and good. It will not only taste nice, it will look nice. From all this the child will learn naturally that God did not make the hideous travesty that we have made of created things," (Caryll Houselander, *The Mother of Christ*).

Sometimes I wonder if the effort is worth it. I woke up this morning thinking about home and about all the ways I try to put into this home the things I wanted from home as child. There is magazine cover beautiful and there is "tiny new Eden" beautiful. In a home that is tiny new Eden beautiful, there is always a soft place to land. There are flowers, to be sure, but more importantly, there is the invitation to inhale their fragrance — there is the welcome and the urging to be a part of the beautiful, to take comfort in it, to enjoy one another amidst it. The effort we put into making things beautiful at home is only as valuable as the effort we put into making people truly feel welcome there and genuinely loved amidst the beauty. Hospitality is ours to extend from the moment our feet touch the floor in the morning. Is our family truly welcome in the home we create and in the spaces of our lives?

There is a point in beauty, Lord. You, the most extraordinary artist, made things beautiful. This is not the stuff of Pinterest competitions. This is the endeavor to let the Artist Creator live and breathe in me. Do not allow me to make a travesty of my household. Instead, help me to bring beauty from the resources You provide.





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
In Despair I Bowed**



THINK

“And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”
Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
the Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men!”

--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

PRAY

We wait and watch and hope and pray and Christmas comes and invariably, there is a disappointment. Something is not just exactly as we'd hoped it would be. But you are, Jesus. You always are. Help us to hear the bells that peal the good news.

ACT

There is someone in your life who is very vulnerable today. Perhaps he is disappointed. Perhaps he has disappointed you. Love him well.

We Miss the Baby in the Manger

"A tiny child is born, who is a great king. Wise men are led to him from afar. They come to adore one who lies in a manger and yet reigns in heaven and on earth. When they tell of one who is born a king, Herod is disturbed. To save his kingdom he resolves to kill him, though if he would have faith in the child, he himself would reign in peace in this life and for ever in the life to come.

Why are you afraid, Herod, when you hear of the birth of a king? He does not come to drive you out, but to conquer the devil. But because you do not understand this you are disturbed and in a rage, and to destroy one child whom you seek, you show your cruelty in the death of so many children."

~ From a sermon by Saint Quodvultdeus, bishop; Office of Readings December 28, Feast of the Holy Innocents

There is a little Herod in all of us, isn't there? Jesus comes to us. He asks us to do things for Him; He tells us we cannot do other things. He closes doors and then opens windows so small and out of reach we wonder how we could ever pass through them. We beg all sorts of things of Him in prayer, things we are certain are just what we need-- the answer, kind and firm, is "No."

And we rage against Him.

We see Him as a threat to all things that could bring happiness. Tiny Baby. Gentleness incarnate. And we rage. And we struggle. And yes, we kill. We destroy peace. We destroy joy. We slaughter childlike faith. All because we think we know better. We are so afraid of relinquishing our own wills, that we miss the one thing that will give us genuine peace.

We miss the Baby in the Manger.

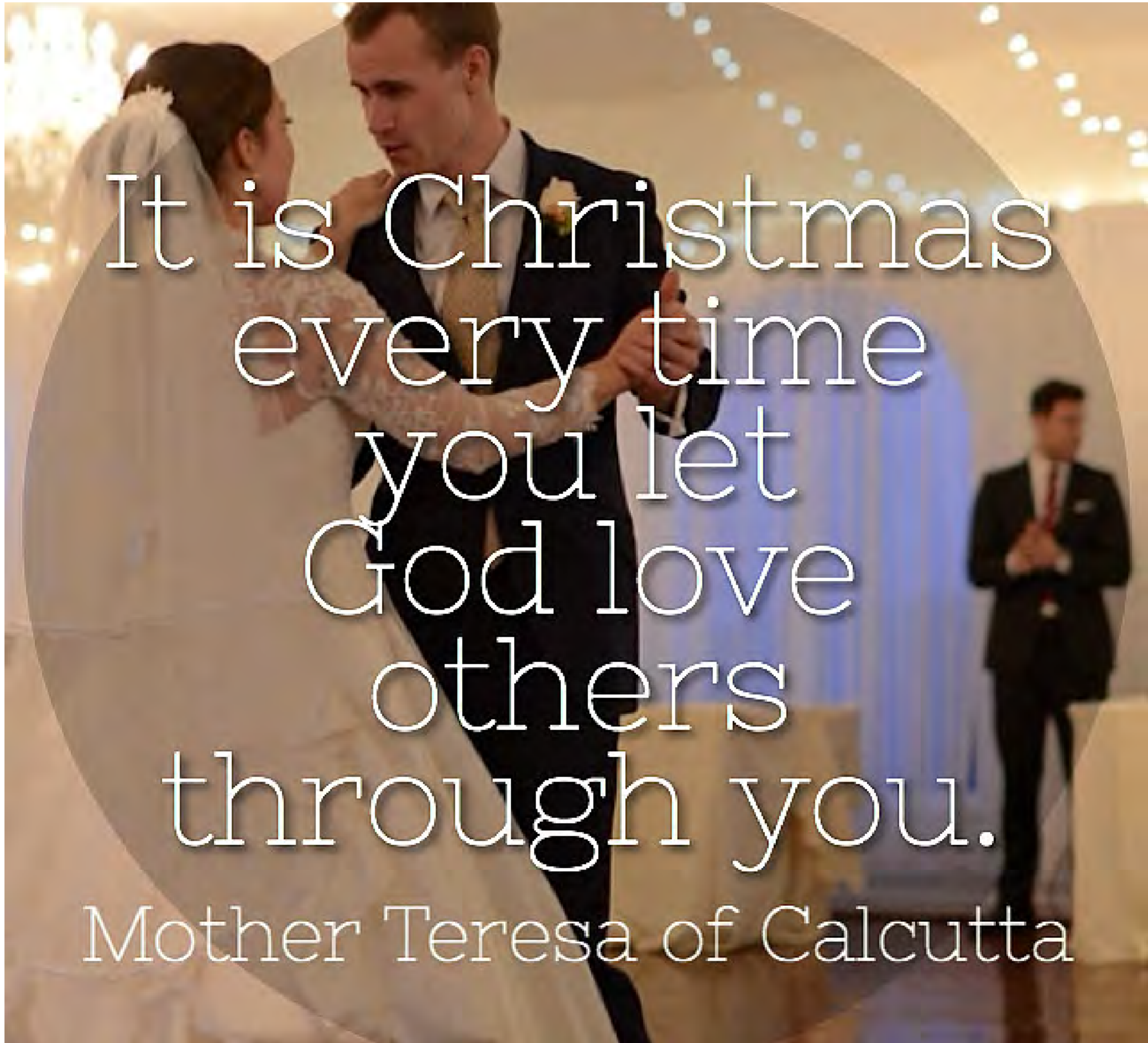
He gathers up the helpless and the small and the weak and the frail and He takes them to Himself. But those that rise up on their own strength and rage against Him? They are left spent and exhausted, wearied to the bone by the efforts of exerting their own will.

All because they are afraid of the Baby in the Manger, afraid to yield to the plan He has. Afraid to become little so that He can become great in their souls. Afraid to let go and let Him be king.

Baby Jesus, I am small and weak and one of my greatest frailties is the inability to recognize that I am nothing without you. Help me to cease striving. Help me to see the great gift of grace You give so freely and to recognize that those Holy Innocents had no merits of their own. Please, Jesus, grant me the peace that comes with truly knowing that we don't win anything; the only true victory is the victory that comes when we yield everything to the man-God hanging on the cross.



#LivingtheLiturgy: Exuberant Love



THINK

"It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you."

-Mother Teresa of Calcutta

PRAY

Dear Jesus, Thank you for the people you have called to love me. Thank you for their kindnesses, their time, their compassion. Thank you for the hospitality offered to me, for the comfort of friendship, for support in stressed moments. Bless those people, Lord. Bless them abundantly.

ACT

Write thank you notes today. Actually mail them.



Feast of the Holy Family



The Feast of the Holy Family is my favorite feast of the year. Maybe I just so love the quiet space at home that is carved by the twelve days of Christmas that the feast in the middle of it was bound to be my favorite. (A few years ago, Michael got married the day before the Feast of the Holy Family and those were not quiet days at all. And still, I loved them. Maybe loved them all the more for the celebration.) I think God loves how much I love this feast and the days that always fall around it with that moveable feast calendar thing, and all. Gosh, I just wrote "love" a whole bunch of times.

When I was seven years old, on December 29, a baby cousin opened my eyes to what a gift an infant is to a little family. I remember holding him and inhaling him and thinking that nothing—nothing—was as perfectly blissful as holding a newborn. I think a vocation was awakened that day.

On December 29th, fourteen years later, a baby was conceived. We were newlywed, madly in love with each other and with Christmas. Joy overflowed and literally grew in those beautiful days of the Octave of the Nativity.

Then there was the December 29th just a couple years later, when I sat starving at a table spread with bountiful goodies. My family had gathered to celebrate the last day of my cancer treatment. They were jubilant. I could not even swallow my own saliva, so raw was my throat after radiation treatments. I was terrified of the days ahead and I felt naked in the light, wondering if, now that treatment was finished, the cancer would come roaring back. So much I didn't know haunted me on that December 29th. I'd been told we'd never have another baby. And on the Feast of the Holy Family, I whispered again and again the prayer I'd said throughout the seven months of treatment: Please God, please, in your mercy let me live to conceive, carry, bear, and raise healthy, happy, holy children for your glory.

On a beautiful December 29th, ten years from that final cancer treatment and eight days after he was born, our sixth child was baptized.

Twelve years later, that baby, our sweet Nicholas, was the best man for his brother Michael, when Michael married Kristin on December 29.

For me, December 29th, is a celebration of new life. Maybe, it's just the extreme INFJ in me that takes until 4 days after Christmas and some heavy doses of quiet at home for true understanding of the whole idea of a baby born to bring us New Life.

There's a baby! He's God and He came to live in a family and to save us all!

So, here we are on (or around) this lovely, glorious, beautiful Feast of the Holy Family. The scriptures for the first Sunday after Christmas will get a second (and maybe third) reading aloud in my house.

There is Sirach first; lovely, nearly forgotten Sirach:

"God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons. Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them. When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother. Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children, and, when he prays, is heard. Whoever reveres his father will live a long life; he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother.

My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins—a house raised in justice to you."

And then Colossians, memorized a few years back so that words fall over me like the greeting and consolation of a beloved friend:

"Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged."

These are living words, my friends. These are the words that underpin our most ordinary of days and these are the words that makes the feasts glorious.

In the Office of Readings, we find the words of Pope Paul VI:

"But I cannot leave without recalling, briefly and in passing, some thoughts I take with me from Nazareth."

First, we learn from its silence. If only we could once again appreciate its great value. We need this wonderful state of mind, beset as we are by the cacophony of strident protests and conflicting claims so characteristic of these turbulent times. The silence of Nazareth should teach us how to meditate in peace and quiet, to reflect on the deeply spiritual, and to be open to the voice of God's inner wisdom and the counsel of his true teachers. Nazareth can teach us the value of study and preparation, of meditation, of a well-ordered personal spiritual life, and of silent prayer that is known only to God.

Second, we learn about family life. May Nazareth serve as a model of what the family should be. May it show us the family's holy and enduring character and exemplifying its basic function in society: a community of love and sharing, beautiful for the problems it poses and the rewards it brings; in sum, the perfect setting for rearing children—and for this there is no substitute.

Finally, in Nazareth, the home of a craftsman's son, we learn about work and the discipline it entails. I would especially like to recognize its value—demanding yet redeeming—and to give it proper respect. I would remind everyone that work has its own dignity. On the other hand, it is not an end in itself. Its value and free character, however, derive not only from its place in the economic system, as they say, but rather from the purpose it serves.

And in the Collect, we pray:

"O God, who were pleased to give us the shining example of the Holy Family, graciously grant that we may imitate them in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity, and so, in the joy of your house, delight one day in eternal rewards. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever."

Today is the day to celebrate family, to reflect on the joys and the sorrows and the blessings. Today is the day to gather the memories close and to resolve again to bring the best of your hopes and dreams to plans for the future.

Today is the day to look with love on the little family gathered close at the manger.

Show us. Please, please show us how best to love one another.





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Choose to be Grateful**



THINK

"Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart responds in bitterness. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the face that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred."

– Henri Nouwen

PRAY

Dear Lord, for what I am about to receive, as the calendar page turns to a new year, make me truly grateful.

ACT

Do you have a notebook in which to record the blessings of the coming year? Get one today.



Eucharisteo

"So, how was your Christmas?" she inquired casually as she slipped the needle into my vein and we both caught our breath. It's a familiar ritual. The nurse makes conversation while she draws blood in an attempt to relax us both and draw attention away from the fact that I have chemo-burned veins and this process is not likely to be a simple one.

Twenty-five years after chemotherapy, I have my own blood draw "rules." I never let them talk about my kids. This one goes way back. Nurses used to try to get me to talk about Michael when I was getting potent cytotoxic drugs. I learned very quickly that I did not want to be talking about my cherubic toddler while my veins began to burn and my stomach, to churn. I learned to steer the conversation back to the nurse with the needle.

"It was fine. Yours? Was everyone at home?"

"Yep. Good. Nothing too terrible happened."

Nothing too terrible happened? Is that the standard for a good Christmas?

"You know," she continued, "It's just a lot of work. Clean and shop and wrap and shop and cook and bake and shop and clean some more. And then, it's over. And you clean again. We put so much into making it a wonderful holiday for everyone around us. It's kind of a relief to go back to work and just have to do business as usual."

I murmured some agreement, because I could see her point. I was tired, too. And kind of relieved to be looking ahead to ordinary time and the rhythms of January. I recalled a conversation I'd just had with my friend, Linda. The homilist on Christmas had asked the congregation to look around at all the teenaged girls. He reminded everyone how egocentric teenagers are. The adults in the crowd nodded in agreement. Even the sweetest teenaged girl is naturally more than a little egocentric. Then the priest asked the crowd to look at the mothers and the grandmothers in the group and to think for moment about what they'd been doing for the past few weeks. Isn't it a Christmas miracle that somehow that egocentric girl grows into a woman who gives everything she has to give for the privilege of serving joy to her family?

I've been thinking about that miracle incessantly these last few days. I've been thinking about the "good Christmas" my family assures me it has been. I've been thinking about how hard I worked to arrive here on the crest of this new year. How hard I work year 'round, really, to bring joy to my family and to live out my vocation with interior joy.

And, longtime readers know, I'm all about being aware of the joy in life and articulating it to others.

Joy, then. That must be the word that finds me on this new year's day.

Joy.

But it's not. It's more than that. My reality is that I do not live easily in the perpetual awareness and effusion of joy. My reality is that I beg joy all the time. I pray -- hard -- for that awareness.

And I beg grace.

God's grace. The outpouring of Himself and His strength and His joy into my very being where it can smother my selfishness and bring blessings of joy to the people God has entrusted to my care.

Grace:

*Grace is a participation in the life of God.

*The Grace of Christ is the gratuitous gift that God makes of His own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it.

An infusion! Yes. Please God, fill these creaky veins with Yourself!

*Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself, to enable it to live with God, to act by his love. Habitual grace, the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God's call..

This is my prayer for this year, for this life: participation in the life of God; His Spirit infused into my very being; a habitual gift, stable and permanent binding me to Our Lord and keeping me in His loving will.

Grace. I want, need, burn for grace.

And joy.

Grace and joy. But only one word? One word for this new year?

This is it:

Eucharisteo.

Ann Voskamp writes, in *One Thousand Gifts, A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*,

The root word of eucharisteo is charis, meaning "grace." Jesus took the bread and saw it as grace and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be gift and gave thanks.

But there is more, and I read it. Eucharisteo, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, charis. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word chara, meaning "joy." Joy. Ah...yes. I might be needing me some of that. That might be what the quest for more is all about--that which Augustine claimed, "Without exception...all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is joy."

Eucharisteo. Grace and joy coursing through my veins, powering my life. That is my earnest desire. That is my need, my want, my call. To live this word in this year, I must live His Word. I know this. I know how to pray the psalms with the Church, to make the rhythm of God's voice the rhythm of my life. I know this is where I will find both grace and joy. And I know that word: Eucharisteo. I know it is available, real, and present and tangible in the quiet of the Church, in the every day (Every day? He's there! And waiting. Every single day!) miracle of Christ's body, offered to us.

To me.

To the self-centered teenaged girl I am and to the grace-filled bearer of joy I am called to be.

Eucharisteo.

Grace and joy in the coming year.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997-2000





**#LivingtheLiturgy:
Awaken to a New Day**



THINK

“Isn't it nice to think that tomorrow is a new day with no mistakes in it yet?”
-- L.M. Montgomery

PRAY

Please Lord, grant me the grace and strength I need to do your will this year.

ACT

I love this Anne of Green Gables quote. It is nice to awaken to a new day, fresh without any mistakes yet in it. The celebration of the new year is a little like that, too. All shiny, unblemished calendar pages—nothing crossed out, nothing forgotten, nothing regrettable.

And then we put our feet on the floor. And inevitably, we mess up.

The mistakes make us humble; they drive us to our knees and they inspire fervent prayers. I've made such a mess of this God; please fix it. Please, please fix it. He always does. He always offers the opportunity to begin again. He always extends forgiveness and mercy. And then, He fixes it, if only we let Him.

Do two things with your new planner today, before the new year begins:

1. Write in the days you will go to confession.
2. Ask God to bless every thing you write in that planner in the new year.

Dipping and Dancing on New Year's Eve

When our children were little, we wanted to establish some New Year's Eve traditions that would keep them home through their growing up years. We wanted our plans to be flexible enough to welcome our children's friends into our home, too. We used to host a family casino night, with prizes for children and adults. As we added to our family, though, our New Year's Eve traditions changed a bit. We still keep everyone home, but the older children (some now in college) invite their friends to celebrate with us. We have collected several fondue pots over the years, so we added a fondue feast to our game night. We set up meal stations early in the evening, dipping steak and seafood, veggies and bread. Even the littlest can dip her own, under careful supervision. There is a happy gathering and festive conversation as we cook communally. Later in the evening, the pots are washed and then set up again to hold melted chocolate and anything we can think to dip in it. Fondue is the perfect food for a long evening, because, as my college-aged son so aptly pointed out, "It takes forever to dip and cook enough to make a meal."



Three Cheese Fondue

- 1 cup White Wine
- 1 Tablespoon Butter
- 1 Tablespoon Unbleached Flour
- 7 Ounces Gruyere, grated
- 7 Ounces Emmenthaler, grated
- 7 Ounces Cheddar, grated

Bring the wine to a boil in a small saucepan and turn it off. Then, melt the butter in a different saucepan, using medium-low heat. Stir the flour into the butter until it's smooth. Stir the wine into the flour mixture, slowly, using a wire whisk. Over medium-low heat, slowly add the cheese, stirring with the whisk as you go. Before we were finished adding, we had to switch to a wooden spoon. When it's all smooth, transfer to a fondue pot and keep it melted and gooey on low.

We dipped Granny Smith apples, hearty rustic sourdough, and blanched broccoli florets. There was no three-cheese left over, but we had bread, broccoli, and apples left on New Year's day. So, I used the above recipe, substituting a cup of beer (not too dark) for the wine, and four generous cups grated cheddar for the cheese. Before adding the cheese, I sprinkled it with a healthy dose of garlic powder and cayenne.



Sarah Annie was one happy dipper.

At the other end of the island, we cooked marinated cubes of London Broil in equal parts butter and olive oil. I had marinated over night in bottle Italian dressing. Simple and really addictive.

<<If you give a gang full and happy tummies, they might just break into wild dancing.>>

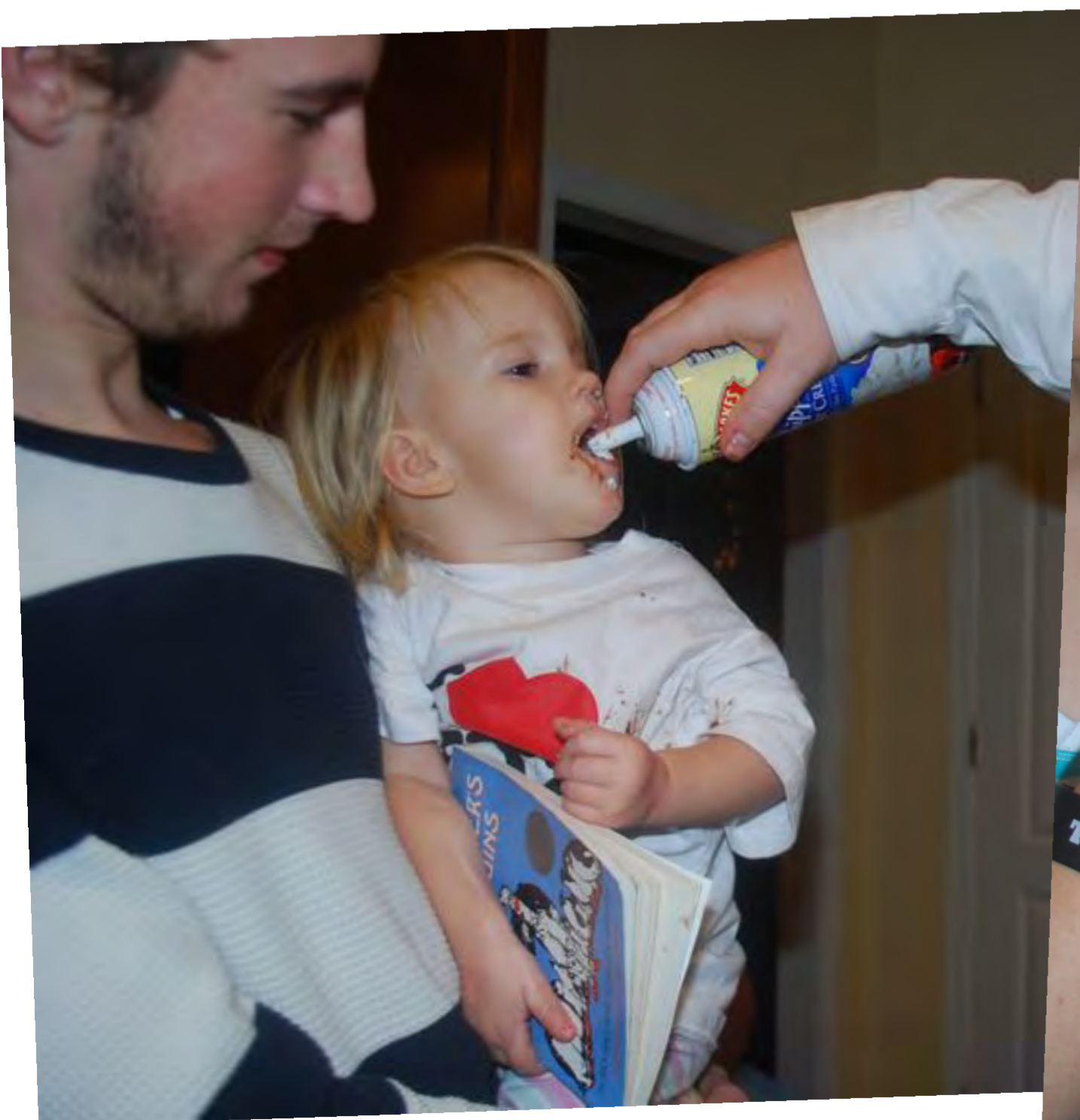


When they were all danced out, it was time for chocolate fondue. I melted equal parts chocolate chips and heavy cream. We dipped pretzels, pineapple, and angel food cake.

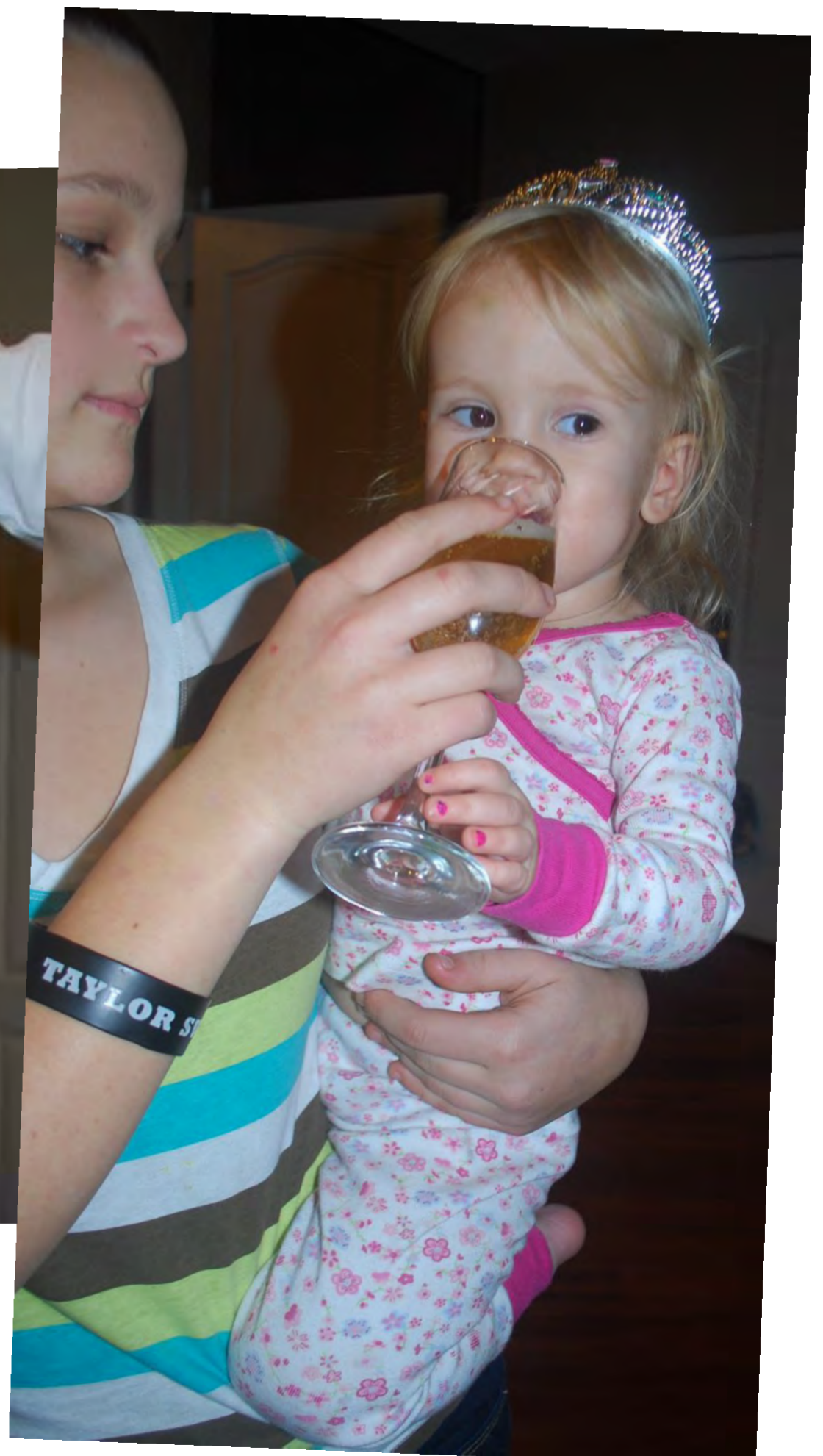
Pound cake, pirouette cookies and marshmallows are other favorites.



When things got a little too chocolatey and sticky, a little whipped cream, straight from the can, did the trick.



A little sparkling cider before going up to bed.



Goodnight, sweet princess.

COUNTING DOWN THE MINUTES: THINGS TO DO WHILE YOU WAIT

Start the celebration with Mass. The vigil Mass for the January 1 Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God is the perfect way to spend the last night of the old calendar and greet the new year. Many parishes also offer parish hall activities and Mass at midnight. We prefer the vigil Mass so that we are all safely off the road well before midnight.

Begin a jigsaw puzzle, one with lots of pieces to work on together throughout the evening. Puzzlers can come and go as they please. Try to finish before midnight!

Play one of the many variations of Monopoly, depending on the ages and interests of your guests. There are so many variations that everyone from little princesses to sports fanatics can be happily playing during the evening.

Try your hand at casino style games. Our family enjoys all for fun card games that require a little luck, a little skill, and a little math - even the young ones can keep up with the older ones in a game of 21.

Make a memory book with a page for each family member. Include height and weight, a list of "favorites" (songs, movies, books, and things special your family), the current aspiration for what he or she wants to be when grown up, a self-portrait, a digital photo, and specific goals for the coming year. If you do this year after year, you will have past years' books upon which to reflect during your New Year's Eve.

**Traditions,
Tutorials,
Recipes
and Gifts**



Traditions & Tutorials

Antipasto Plate Tutorial

One of our long-held traditions is to make antipasto during the Christmas season. I rarely (if ever) make it any other time of the year, but I usually make it twice or more during Christmas. This year, I made one for lunch on Christmas day and another, the next day, as an appetizer. All my ingredients came from Costco and Trader Joe's. There are as many ways to make this as there are cooks in kitchens on any given day. And it never comes out the same here. When I shop, I always buy the following:

- Provolone cheese
- Salami
- Prosciutto
- Kalamata olives
- Marinated artichoke hearts
- Marinated roasted peppers
- Tapenade or a roasted eggplant spread

I also buy marinated button mushrooms. And I'm sure I put them in my cart this time. However, my shopping companion does not like mushrooms and they mysteriously were absent when I unloaded at home. Ahem.

You can add all sorts of things: any marinated vegetable salad, balls of fresh mozzarella, green olives, marinated sun dried tomatoes. It's fun to look for little treasures in your store. Well, usually it's fun. When we lived in the deep south it was kind of frustrating. There was not really an abundance of Italian delis in South Carolina.

Every year, one or more of my children begs to make the antipasto. And I never let them. It's my secret anti-anxiety therapy. If I'm stressed about a party or a certain guest, I head to the kitchen and cook something that requires some creative thought. Calms me every time. This particular party food? The ultimate creative fun in the kitchen. Just play with the food; there's no right or wrong.



I start with a layer of cheese on an oval platter. I'm not sure why it's an oval platter, but I think it might be the only rule. As I build, the marinades from the vegetables will season the cheese, too.

Then salami folded into little flowers. It's nice to build some dimension.



Lots of meat and cheese at this point. Easily, this is a lunch or a hearty football food.

The meats I bought at Costco this year had salami and capocollo and sopressata in the same package, so I rolled some meat as well as making flowers.



Then, I added color-- marinated yellow and red peppers sliced into thin strips. After this is all made, I never eat the meat and cheese, but I'm all about the vegetables. We have cousins who won't touch the veggies but make a full meal of the meat and cheese. There's something for everyone and there is rarely anything left over at the end of the day.

I love the peppers. I use an entire jar for each antipasto and usually wish I had more.

Tuck an olive inside each of those flowers and scatter some more around the perimeter. There are never leftover olives.



Tapenade in the center. Mary Beth loves green olive tapenade. I'm fairly certain it's hers alone.

Marinated artichoke hearts wherever I can put them. My sister and I used to fight over who got to eat those.

See? Art.

And it's never the same twice.

Here is the one I did the next day. I think this might be my favorite one ever.

Until next year.





Liturgical Mantel Letters

Our mantel letters are an enduring part of the way we celebrate the seasons. It's so simple to make these and then store them and switch them out. We began with letters that spelled "REPENT" for Lent and golden letters that spelled "ALLELUIA" for the Easter season. That year, at Advent, Paddy remarked that we'd only have to buy a few more letters, paint them the same purple, and we could have "PREPARE" for Advent. I went him one better and made some that said "JOY" for Gaudete Sunday.

Here's how:

Paint unfinished wooden letters (or even these black ones with flat bottom) with acrylic craft paint. You'll need a couple coats or so. This is a job well done by a four-year-old if you're willing to come along behind and smooth things out a bit.



After they are dry, you have two options. You can use ModgePodge to apply Diamond Dust to them. This makes them super sparkly and really pretty in the candlelight. It also makes them a bit dangerous. Diamond Dust is little shards of glass. The addition of that element makes it a grownup craft in the execution and in the storage and handling later. Alternatively, paint with a couple of coats of glitter paint and let dry. So, so pretty!



APPENDIX | TRADITIONS, TUTORIALS,
RECIPES AND GIFTS





Poinsettia Flower Fairies



My friend Missy made these with my big kids years ago. It was fun to make them again with the little guys. I noticed that a certain really big kid wandered in long enough to "help" make three of them. The boy still can't resist a little paint and the smell of a glue gun!

You need a clothespin doll kit, flesh colored pipe cleaners, silk poinsettias, a glue gun, yellow felt, fake hair, pink paint and paint for the color of the eyes.

For each flower fairy, snip apart the poinsettias so that you have two larger red petals and two smaller ones. You'll need two green leaves about the size of the larger red petals. Reserve the middle of the flower, too. Cut a rectangle of yellow felt to use as a tunic. You'll want a very small hole in the middle of it.

Glue the hair to the top of the doll head.

Glue the larger red petals to the clothes pin to make a skirt. The petals will curve as you glue them around the clothes pin. One goes in the front and one goes in the back.



Layer the smaller red petals over the larger ones.

APPENDIX | TRADITIONS, TUTORIALS,
RECIPES AND GIFTS



Thread a flesh colored pipecleaner through the hole in the clothes pin, looping it to make arms.

Slip the tunic over the top of the clothespin and tie it with gold cord.



Pop the head on top of the clothespin.

Glue the green leaves to the back to make fairy wings.

Glue a little bit of the center of the poinsettia flowers to the top of the head.

Paint a face or use magic markers.

Tie with gold cord to hang.





Homemade Gifts



Christmas Jam

INGREDIENTS

2 packages (20 ounces each) frozen whole strawberries or
2-1/2 quarts fresh strawberries
1 pound fresh or frozen cranberries
5 pounds sugar
2 pouches (3 ounces each) liquid fruit pectin

DIRECTIONS

Grind strawberries and cranberries in a food processor or grinder; place in a Dutch oven. Add sugar. Bring to a full rolling boil; boil for 1 minute. Remove from the heat; stir in pectin and return to a full rolling boil. Boil for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from the heat. Cool for 5 minutes; skim off foam. Carefully ladle hot mixture into hot half-pint jars, leaving 1/4-in headspace. Remove air bubbles; wipe rims and adjust lids. Process for 10 minutes in a boiling-water canner.

YIELD : About 14 half-pints





Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Quick Bread in a Jar

These are just way too cute. I've tweaked the recipe a bit and my many and varied testers give it two thumbs up. Such a pretty gift!

Layer these ingredients in this order in a 1 quart Mason jar. When you get to the brown sugar, tamp it all down so you have room for chocolate chips. It fits; I promise. I did it.

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup rolled oats
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup chopped walnuts
1/2 cup miniature chocolate chips

Attach a card with these instructions:

Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Quick Bread

1. In a large bowl, mix the contents of this bottle: 2 cups all-purpose flour, 1 cup rolled oats, 1/2 cup granulated sugar, 1/2 cup brown sugar, 2 teaspoons baking powder, 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/2 cup miniature chocolate chips.
2. In a small bowl, beat 3/4 cup sour cream, 3/4 cup milk, 2 large eggs, and 1/4 cup melted butter.
3. Stir wet mixture into dry ingredients just until evenly moistened (batter will be lumpy).
4. Scrape into a buttered and floured 9- by 5-inch loaf pan (with a 9-cup capacity), and bake in a 350° oven until a wooden skewer inserted in the center comes out clean, about an hour.



Here's a pretty PDF with cards all ready for printing.

[Download Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Quick Bread Labels](#)





Recipes



Welcome to Peppermint Day

We had a full day of candy-making today.

The [peanut butter balls](#) are too yummy for words. I remember them being perfectly rounded and covered with smooth chocolate. Mine do not look like that. However, I have no recollection of ever having made these candies, so I'm guessing that the reason my mother's looked so perfect is that I wasn't invited to make them with her. She made them with a group of neighbors. That was her tradition and I can see how it would be fun to sit and dip with the ladies.

Instead, I dipped with a rather large bunch of boys (and a couple of girls thrown in for the "calming effect"). They had a grand time and, as I mentioned, the candy does taste wonderful. I've hidden them carefully. Still, I doubt there will be any left in the next few days. (Brief digression here: We seem to be going through eggs, half-and-half, and chocolate at an alarming rate. This phenomenon definitely coincides with the last day of exams at GMU.) I think I'll make more peanut butter balls, maybe in the dark of night. I wonder if Mike might like dipping chocolate with me. I didn't try the almond variety because the kids gave almond butter a big thumbs down and Katie said she wouldn't eat the almond version anyway. So we used Jif, which made it a treat before I even got started. My children are fascinated by peanut butter that doesn't require stirring.

The fudge was predictable perfection.

The [marshmallows](#) are like peppermint clouds. It's a sticky mess for a few moments, but the whole messy part is easily dissolved with very hot water. It was great fun to watch my mixer turn gelatin and sugar into clouds of peppermint heaven. And the marshmallows rendered? Truly amazing.

We floated them in [cocoa](#), sprinkled with crushed peppermint candy, and read the [Legend of the Candy Cane](#). Nicholas was one happy boy.





Peppermint Hot Chocolate

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cups unsweetened cocoa powder
2 cups cane sugar
1 1/2 cup nonfat dry milk
1 bag of starlight peppermint candies,
crushed in food processor

DIRECTIONS

Combine all.
Stir four TBS mix into a cup of hot milk.

Makes 5 cups dry mix.

Mexican Hot Chocolate

INGREDIENTS

2 cups whole milk
1 tablespoon brown sugar
4 1/2 ounces dark chocolate, chopped
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/8 teaspoon ground cinnamon
pinch cayenne pepper

DIRECTIONS

Place the milk and sugar in a medium saucepan and bring to a simmer. In a small bowl, stir a little hot milk into the chocolate, vanilla, cinnamon, and cayenne pepper. Stir until smooth. Turn off the heat and stir the chocolate into the milk until it's blended.

Reheat the hot chocolate over low heat until it simmers.

Pour into mugs, top with whipped cream and cinnamon sticks, with which to stir.



Peppermint Bark

INGREDIENTS

17 ounces good-quality white chocolate (such as Lindt or Baker's), finely chopped

30 red-and-white-striped hard peppermint candies, coarsely crushed (about 6 ounces)

7 ounces bittersweet (not unsweetened) or semisweet chocolate, chopped

6 tablespoons whipping cream

3/4 teaspoon peppermint extract

DIRECTIONS

Turn large baking sheet bottom side up. Cover securely with foil. Mark 12 x 9-inch rectangle on foil.

Stir white chocolate in metal bowl set over saucepan of barely simmering water (do not allow bottom of bowl to touch water) until chocolate is melted and smooth and candy thermometer registers 110°F. (chocolate will feel warm to touch).

Remove from over water. Pour 2/3 cup melted white chocolate onto rectangle on foil.

Using icing spatula, spread chocolate to fill rectangle. Sprinkle with 1/4 cup crushed peppermints.

Chill until set, about 15 minutes.

Stir bittersweet chocolate, cream and peppermint extract in heavy medium saucepan over medium-low heat until just melted and smooth.

Cool to barely lukewarm, about 5 minutes.

Pour bittersweet chocolate mixture in long lines over white chocolate rectangle.

Using icing spatula, spread bittersweet chocolate in even layer.

Refrigerate until very cold and firm, about 25 minutes.

Rewarm remaining white chocolate in bowl set over barely simmering water to 110°F. Working quickly, pour white chocolate over firm bittersweet chocolate layer; spread to cover. Immediately sprinkle with remaining crushed peppermints.

Chill just until firm, about 20 minutes.

Lift foil with bark onto work surface; trim edges. Cut bark crosswise into 2-inch-wide strips.

Using metal spatula, slide bark off foil and onto work surface. Cut each strip crosswise into 3 sections and each section diagonally into 2 triangles.

Let stand 15 minutes at room temperature

Can be made 2 weeks ahead. Chill in airtight container.



Homemade Peppermint Marshmallows

INGREDIENTS

.75-oz unflavored gelatin (3 envelopes of Knox gelatin)

3/4 cup water, divided

2 cups granulated sugar

2/3 cups light corn syrup

1/4 teaspoon salt

2 tsp vanilla extract

1 tsp peppermint oil/extract

DIRECTIONS

Line 9 x 9-inch pan with plastic wrap and lightly oil it. Set aside.

In the bowl of an electric mixer, sprinkle gelatin over 1/2 cup water. Soak for about 10 minutes.

While the gelatin is soaking, combine sugar, corn syrup and remaining 1/4 cup water in a small saucepan. Bring the mixture to a full, rapid boil then boil hard for 1 minute.

Pour the boiling syrup into soaked gelatin and turn on the mixer, using the whisk attachment, to high speed. Add the salt and beat for 12 minutes. After 12 minutes, add in the vanilla and peppermint extracts and mix just until they are fully incorporated.

Scrape warm marshmallow into the prepared pan and spread evenly (lightly greasing your hands and the spatula helps a lot here). Take another piece of lightly oiled plastic wrap and press lightly on top of the marshmallow, creating a seal. Let mixture sit for a few hours, or overnight, until cooled and firmly set.

When the marshmallows are set, you can cut them up. In a shallow dish, combine equal parts cornstarch and confectioners' sugar. Remove marshmallow from pan and cut into equal pieces with clean, lightly oiled scissors (the best tool for the job)

or a chef's knife. I generally cut the big marshmallow block into seven strips, then cut each into 8 or 9 square marshmallows. Dredge each piece of marshmallow in confectioners' sugar mixture. Store in an airtight container. Makes about 60 marshmallows.





Peppermint Chocolate Cookies

INGREDIENTS

1 package (17 oz.) Gluten Free Brownie Mix (order King Arthur from Amazon)
1/4 cup HERSHEY'S Cocoa
1/4 cup finely crushed hard peppermint candies (about 12 candies)
3 tablespoons water
1 egg
3 TBS melted butter
1/3 cup powdered sugar for rolling
48 Hershey's Kisses Candy Cane Candies

DIRECTIONS

Stir together brownie mix, cocoa and crushed peppermint candies in large bowl.
Add, water, egg and butter, beating until well blended.
Refrigerate about 1 hour or until firm enough to roll.
Heat oven to 350°F.
Line cookie sheet with parchment paper or lightly grease.
Remove wrappers from candies.
Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll balls in powdered sugar and place on prepared cookie sheet.
Bake 9 to 11 minutes or until set. (Some peppermint may melt out along edges of cookies.
After removing from oven, immediately use edge of knife or spatula to push melted peppermint back to edges of cookie.)
Cool 2 minutes. Press candy piece into center of each cookie.
Slide parchment paper and cookies to wire rack or remove cookies from cookie sheet to wire rack.
Cool completely.

Makes about 48 cookies.





Dipped Peanut Butter Balls

INGREDIENTS

16 Ounces Creamy Peanut Butter
1 (16-ounce) Package Powdered Sugar
1 Cup Butter, Softened
1 (12-ounce) Package Semisweet Chocolate

DIRECTIONS

In a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium speed, combine peanut butter, powdered sugar and butter. Beat until smooth.
Scoop out spoonfuls and roll into 1-inch balls.
Arrange on baking sheet and refrigerate 30 minutes.
Line another baking sheet with waxed paper. Place chocolate chips in top of double boiler.
Melt over simmering water, stirring until smooth.
Using wooden picks, dip balls into chocolate to coat completely, letting excess drip back into pan.
Set balls on prepared sheet.
Store in refrigerator.



Pretzel Dots

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 200 degrees.

Unwrap all the Hershey Kisses.

Place one Kiss on one pretzel
(I used wagon wheel pretzels)

Heat the Kisses for 5-10 minutes

(The white ones melt more quickly.

You just want them shiny and a little soft.)

Press the M & Ms into the Kisses. Don't move/touch them after pressing.

Refrigerate them until they are hard.





Recipes for a Simple Christmas Morning



Hashbrown Casserole

INGREDIENTS

1 30 oz package frozen shredded hash browns
2 pounds sage sausage, cooked, drained and crumbled
1 sweet onion, diced and cooked until soft
1 red pepper, diced and cooked until soft
1 package fresh baby spinach. stirred into the hot peppers and onions until wilted
2 cups shredded cheddar cheese, divided and reserve 3/4 cup.
1/2 teaspoon salt
12 eggs
3 cups milk

DIRECTIONS

In a large bowl, combine the hash browns, sausage, peppers, onions, and 1 1/4 cup cheese and salt.

Spoon into a greased 17-in. x 11-in. baking dish.

Bake the hashbrowns until they are just golden.

Remove from oven. (Cool, if you are going to refrigerate overnight.)

In another large bowl, beat eggs and milk until blended; pour over hash brown mixture. Sprinkle with paprika.

At this point, you can cover and refrigerate.

Bake, uncovered, at 350° for 45-50 minutes or until a knife inserted near the center comes out clean.

Sprinkle with remaining cheese.

Feel free to substitute bacon for the sausage.





College Boys' Favorite French Toast

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE FRENCH TOAST:

1 loaf Crusty French Bread
8 whole Eggs
2 cups Whole Milk
1/2 cup Whipping Cream
3/4 cups Sugar
3 Tablespoons Vanilla Extract

FOR THE TOPPING:

1/2 cup White Wheat Flour
1/2 cup Firmly Packed Brown Sugar
1 teaspoon Cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon Salt
1 pinch Nutmeg
1 stick Cold Butter, Cut Into Pieces

DIRECTIONS

Grease a 9 x 13-inch baking pan with butter. Tear bread into chunks (or have a child tear) and spread evenly in the pan.

In a blender, gently mix eggs, milk, cream, sugar, and vanilla. Pour evenly over the bread. Cover tightly and store in the fridge for several hours or overnight.

In a separate bowl, mix flour, brown sugar, cinnamon, and salt. Add nutmeg if desired. Pulse carefully in a food processor or cut with a pastry blender until it looks like little pebbles. Store crumb mixture in a zippered plastic bag in the fridge.

When you're ready to bake the casserole, preheat oven to 350 F. Remove casserole from the fridge and sprinkle crumb mixture over the top. Bake about an hour and drizzle individual servings with maple syrup, if desired.

