

imagining heaven

advent devotional

by Sheralyn Janson



introduction

**For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror;
then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part;
then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”
1 Corinthians 13:12**

We see and know only in part as we dwell within these pre-resurrection bodies. How then do we live with hope on this side of heaven? How do we catch a glimpse of what will one day be?

I've come to believe that imagination plays an intrinsic role in developing and maintaining Christian hope. During the advent season we wait with anticipation for the exquisitely humble first coming of the Saviour of the world. This advent season I invite you to join me in also imagining and longing for the second coming of Christ. We live broken lives in a broken world. Who and what are we placing our hope in? If we don't take the time to consider this question, do we have hope or are we simply optimists, wanting all to turn out well?

John had hope. He envisaged and penned it: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. 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 21:2-5)

How might we allow Jesus to ignite our hope as we look forward to the day we will see him face to face? The following reflections are intended to assist you in meditating on hope. There are 24 days of advent but I have written only 12 reflections, in part to give you space and time to contemplate, so take as much time with each day as you need.

I invite you to imagine eternity with me throughout this advent season.



Day 1

“The Lord your God is with you, the mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” Zeph. 3:17

Before we can begin to look with hope toward a new heaven and new earth, perhaps we need to address our own doubts that keep us from experiencing the reality that this hope is for us, because we are God’s beloved ones. I often struggle with receiving the Father’s love and I believe many of us wrestle, on some level, with embracing the truth of our unique and full acceptance by the Father through Christ. You and I are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139) and as the Father spoke over Jesus, “This is my beloved child,” (Matthew 3:17) so he speaks this truth over each and every one of us. You are his beloved daughter, you are his beloved son. He is delighted with you!

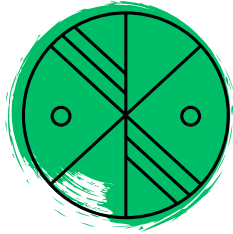
Henri Nouwen writes that “every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you the Beloved, you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert.”

“You have searched me, Lord,
And you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
You perceive my thoughts from afar.
You are familiar with all my ways...
For you created my inmost being;
You knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

This day, yield to this quiet yet persistent voice speaking words of love over you. Read all of Psalm 139 and ask the Spirit of God to illuminate these words, to move them from your head to your heart. Allow the images of the Psalm to form in your mind. Can you imagine him crafting your inner being, weaving the intricacies of your thoughts, desires, struggles, and dreams into your unique personhood? Take some time to do this. Imagine his artistry, his creativity as he formed you. Allow yourself to dwell there. Hear his voice speaking your name, telling you that you are uniquely beloved, not because of anything you’ve done, but because of who you are. How best can you sit with this truth? Lean into God in whatever way works best for you (ie. go for a walk, listen to music, journal, create something, or just be still with the words of Psalm 139).

As you begin to trust in God’s loving voice it is my prayer that he will increase your desire for him. I invite you to return to the truth of your belovedness as often as possible during this season of advent. May he become your source of hope as you learn to trust in his delight in you.

Passages for further meditation: Hosea 11:1-4, Psalm 36:5-9, Romans 8:31-39, Zephaniah 3:17-20.



Day 2

“Do you fear you shall want when you come to heaven? Shall you want the drops when you have the ocean; or the light of the candle, when you have the sun; or the shallow creature when you have the perfect Creator?”

Allow me to introduce you to Richard Baxter, an English Puritan church leader (1615-1691) who penned these words, and was no stranger to suffering. When he was healthy he had no inclination to write but due to chronic bleeding found himself facing a death sentence and living a largely solitary existence. At this time he started to meditate on life after death and was compelled to organize his thoughts in writing. As his sickness continued, what he intended to be only the length of one or two sermons developed into a work of 800,000 words on Christian hope.

Baxter's shortened (and much more accessible) version of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* has caused me to examine more closely how hope shows up in my own life. He has inspired me to look at the beauty and wonder of all that is good in life as pointing to a larger reality. You and I may not be suffering from acute illness, but we share the human experience of loss and pain, fear and grief. It comes to us in varying degrees and can at times be deeply crippling. But we also know many earthly joys that echo the Creator: a satisfying meal, music that makes us want to weep or to dance, an intimate conversation with a close friend, the purity of untouched snow, a stunning sunrise that brings our morning rush to a halt.

We've all had moments, haven't we, when we are caught by something that seems to be partially unveiling something more beautiful and perfect. What if we took those moments, those 'God-glimpses' if you will, and asked our loving Father to help us see more completely, to imagine more fully the life to come?

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” 1 Corinthians 13:12

Notice this day the gifts of this life, and value them deeply as they draw you into anticipation of the day all will be made new. Take some time to write them down as you recognize them, or before you go to bed, look back and take note of the 'God-glimpses' you experienced. Know that they are mere drops in the ocean of our eternal hope.



Day 3

C.S. Lewis in *The Last Battle*, ushers us into the new Narnia. Here Aslan beckons his friends "Further up and further in!" As they follow they find themselves stopping to look around, "partly because it was so beautiful but partly also because there was something about it which they could not understand.

'Peter' said Lucy, 'where is this, do you suppose?'

'I don't know,' said the High King. 'It reminds me of somewhere but I can't give it a name. Could it be somewhere we once stayed for a holiday when we were very, very small?'

...'Those hills,' said Lucy, 'the nice woody ones and the blue ones behind - aren't they very like the Southern border of Narnia?'

'Like!' Cried Edmund after a moment's silence. 'Why they're exactly like...'

'And yet they're not like,' said Lucy. 'They're different. They have more colours on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more...more...oh, I don't know...'

"More like the real thing," said the Lord Digory softly.

Suddenly Farsighted the Eagle spread his wings, soared thirty or forty feet up into the air, circled round and then alighted on the ground.'

Kings and Queens,' he cried, 'we have all been blind. We are only beginning to see where we are. From up there I have seen it all...Narnia is not dead. This is Narnia.'

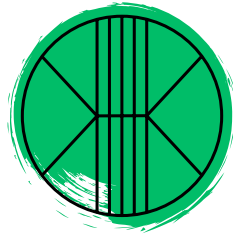
'But how can it be?...'

'The Eagle is right,' said the Lord Digory. 'Listen, Peter. When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and will always be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's world. You need not mourn over Narnia, Lucy. All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door. And of course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream.'"

Can you begin to imagine this along with me? There is a new heaven and a new earth to come, and although it is somewhat 'like' our current reality, it is also 'not like.' Because this mind God has given us, these eyes that see, these ears that hear, they are good gifts, but they are not yet able to fully grasp the 'real thing.'

"See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in no more." (Isaiah 65:17-19)

Take the time to read Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 65:17-25) fully on your own. He writes of homes built, vineyards cultivated and fully enjoyed. There is peace within the very fabric of creation, and destruction will no longer take up residence in this perfected world. Ask God to meet you in your imaginings. Invite him to increase your longing for this day. Allow him to touch any doubts that surface in the midst of your meditation and infuse them with hope. I believe that we may, one day in eternity, echo Lord Digory's realization, that it is "More like the real thing."



Day 4

I am weary this morning as I write these words. My (almost) adopted 5 year old was up for a two hour stretch last night with anxiety in part about an upcoming doctor's appointment. You may not know this at first glance but if you spend any length of time with him you'll come to discover that pre-memory experiences in his first year of life have formed him deeply. He is highly intelligent, athletic, and handsome, and yet he struggles with knowing he is safe and loved. I am not a perfect parent by any means, but I work hard to understand his anxieties and fears. These can overwhelm him and result in physical and verbal aggression. He has very good days and is a source of delight to me! But he also has days when his anxiety is so high I am overwhelmed with the depth of his need. How does hope inform my son's development and future? How does hope inform my discouragement and my responses to him in the moment?

Richard Baxter writes of the Spirit bringing heavenly things within our grasp through the senses. He tells us that God wouldn't have given us our senses if they couldn't have been used to assist us in beginning to comprehend the wonders of heaven. "The object of faith is far off...but the object of sense is close at hand. It is no easy matter to rejoice at that which we never saw...but to rejoice in that which we see and feel is not difficult."

Can we imagine that earthly pleasures are but a shadow of the eternal? When my son laughs or allows me to hug him, are these not but glimpses of the ultimate healing of his mind and heart? And when his anxieties result in tears or anger, can I not rejoice that one day every tear will be wiped from every eye? Is your thirst temporarily satisfied with water? Know that the Spirit will ultimately quench the deep thirst of your soul. Have you shared a deep belly laugh with a friend? Know that this is but a foretaste of your eternal joy. You and I have experienced the warmth and light of the sun on our face; God's Word promises that the new Jerusalem "does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." (Revelation 21:23)

Envision this! That "as God advanceth our sense and enlargeth our capacity; so will he advance the happiness of those senses, and fill up with himself all that capacity" (Richard Baxter). Our senses and even our capacity for God will be enlarged so that we have the ability to receive him fully! All those truths that we believe in our heads but can't convince our hearts of, the endless questions we struggle to make sense of, will all be made clear and perfected in the light of his face. Baxter proclaims that we "shall then love a thousand times more strongly and sweetly than now we can."

"Lord our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infant you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you *care for them*?" Psalm 8:1-4 (emphasis added)

Allow the words of this psalm to guide you in prayer. Pour out your heart to him, find rest as you place your hope in Jesus, who formed the entire universe and yet bends down to care for us; who came to earth as a baby to redeem us, and who invites us into eternity in his presence.

Day 5

My mom passed away due to cancer at the age of 63. She loved Jesus with persistence and passion. She also suffered from depression throughout many periods of her life. I have acute memories of the joy she experienced: worshiping God at the piano, reading us her favourite stories, going for long walks with my dad. But I also have sharp memories of her being too depressed to get out of bed or brush her hair, unable to enjoy music or beauty. My heart aches with these memories.

What makes her life so powerful in my mind is that she spent her life longing for her eternal rest. She longed for it when she was depressed and yearned to be released from her emotional darkness. She envisioned it when she was well and able to experience the poignant beauty of this life. Maybe she saw beauty more deeply because she lived so often with the darkness.

When she was emotionally well she had a sense of wonder and joy in the gifts of this life. A few years before she became sick we were enjoying a walk and a plane overhead halted her in her tracks. "I'll never get over the wonder of an airplane in flight!" she exclaimed. I remember inwardly rolling my eyes a bit with her childlike delight in it. But looking back I think she was closer to heaven in that moment than I. While I was probably thinking about getting the kids home and making dinner, she was caught in the wonder of the sacred ordinary: the everyday miracle of our God-given ability to create a means of flight!

My mom spent her last 5 years of life largely free of depression. After her first round of cancer treatments she shared with me that God had given her these words from the prophet Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour." (Isaiah 43:1-3)

But when the cancer returned, she was full of fear. She became depressed again and I was angry. The injustice of her mental health issues coupled with cancer deeply troubled me. Her anxiety and fear followed her to the end. Although I wasn't able to be physically by her side when she passed, my sisters held the phone to her ear and I told her how beloved she was, how thankful I was for her life and that I knew she would see Jesus' face of love soon.

I believe those words of Isaiah held her as she crossed over. I believe that her wonder in the beauty of the world in her good moments provided hope that sustained her through the darkness. I believe she joins the throng of worshippers before the throne of Jesus, proclaiming: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." (Revelation 4:11) She worships more freely and fully than she was able in this lifetime. What joy! What hope!

This story of hope I share with you is a common story. Many of us know someone who has struggled with depression or we've experienced it ourselves. Most of us have lived through the heart-wrenching loss of a loved one. But depression and death do not have the final word! My mom's life taught me this as she allowed the gifts of this life to fill her with wonder and to hold her up through the darkness.

Let's embrace this reality that one day the darkness will be obliterated by the light! Is there a loss or some darkness that you carry which God longs to infuse with hope? Speak of this burden with him. Ask him to help you believe in the eternal hope we have. I invite you back to a portion of Psalm 139, a scripture my mom pored over again and again.

"If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you." (11,12)



Day 6

John Bunyan, who wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was also familiar with suffering; he was persecuted and imprisoned due to his nonconformity to the Church of England during the 17th century. His memoir, written during his incarceration, chronicles a sharp combination of mental health issues and spiritual questioning. He wrote that he found comfort in Hebrews 12:22-23: "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect..."

Bunyan explains that God used these words to bring renewal to his spirit: "I have had sweet sights... of my being with Jesus in another world: O the mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem...have been sweet unto me in this place..."

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan articulates this vision as Christian and his companion, Hopeful, come to the end of their pilgrimage. Before they reach the gate of the Celestial City, they must pass through the River of Death. As they cross Christian sinks into despair and Hopeful buoys him up continually, telling him, "Be of good cheer, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole..." To this, Christian exclaims,

"Oh I see him again! And he tells me, When thou passes through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the Rivers, they shall not overflow thee." (The very words my mom was given in prayer before her cancer returned.) And Christian describes:

Now I saw in my Dream, that these two men went in at the Gate; and lo, as they entered, they were transfigured, and they had Raiment[clothing] put on that shone like Gold... Then I heard in my Dream, that all the bells in the City Rang again for joy; and it was said unto them, Enter ye into the joy of your Lord... Now just as the Gates were opened to let in the men, I looked in after them; and behold, the City shone like the Sun, the Streets also were paved with Gold, and in them walked many men, with Crowns on their heads, Palms in their hands, and golden Harps to sing praises with all... There were also of them that had wings, and they answered one another without intermission, saying Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord."

My mom asked for the song "We Will Dance" (by David Ruis) to be sung at her funeral:

Sing a song of celebration, lift up a shout of praise,
For the bridegroom will come, the glorious One.
Dance with all your might, lift up your hands and clap for joy,
For the time's drawing near, when he will appear.
And oh, we will stand by his side, a strong, pure spotless bride.
And we will dance on the streets that are golden,
The glorious bride and the great son of man,
From every tribe and tongue and nation,
We will join, in the song of the lamb.

I can assure you that I did not feel like singing this song when the time came. My heart was throbbing with grief and my hands hung by my side as the song leader asked us to stand. And yet, my mom requested this song for a reason. As the words, pulled from scripture, washed over me, I begin to imagine what my mom longed for in the midst of her journey. These words from the book of Revelation weren't just happy thoughts to sing on a Sunday morning; they were her very life, the essence of her hope. She knew, in the throes of her emotional and physical pain, that she would one day see the Saviour's face and dance for joy!

So what difference does this make to us in this moment in which we find ourselves? Can meditating on the joy to come transform how we live today?

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. 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 21:2-5)

I invite you to read this scripture several times, allowing God to move the truth of our eternal hope from your head to your heart. Ask God to meet you in the imaginative realm and trust that the God who created you is delighted to meet you there.



Day 7

Over 10 years ago, our family spent 3 years in Indonesia working with Mennonite Central Committee. Before we went I had a strong faith in Jesus and a trust that he would carry me through whatever came my way. I was excited to travel with my family (Luke and Daniel were preschoolers at the time), and my desire was to share the love of Christ and learn from the Indonesian people.

A number of things occurred that were difficult during our time overseas, but two things shook my faith most acutely: an earthquake we lived through (in which more than 5,700 people died and tens of thousands were injured or lost their homes) and being faced daily with extensive poverty. The God of goodness and love I had grown up believing in was no longer so easily trusted. I became increasingly fearful for my life as well as my eternal destiny. Did God actually love me? Was he really good? I began having panic attacks and lived with constant fear. Would another earthquake occur? Would I be trapped under the rubble and hear my children cry out to me, unable to help them? Or would I die and not see the loving face of my Saviour but instead a wrathful God who only loved me based on what I did or didn't do? And surely I hadn't done enough to help the people of Indonesia. Yet as much as I couldn't bring myself to trust this God who allowed earthquakes and poverty, I was drawn to Peter's voice in John 6:68: "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." And so began my search for God in the midst of the darkness.

A journal entry from this time reads: *"God, right now it is too much, I can't take it all in, I read the Bible, I pray, I think, I read some more...Dear Jesus, I confess I don't understand who you are fully but I want to know you. I confess I've been living many years trying to be good enough for you. But I can't. I am sinful and broken, impatient and unloving. Please forgive me...You see my deepest fears and questions in my heart and I pray you will reveal yourself to me."*

My journal from this time is filled with these types of prayers. At one point in the darkness I heard a gentle voice say, "I have carried you this far, I will carry you home." Even after hearing these words of comfort I still had profound doubts. I continued to struggle when we returned to Canada but also kept calling out to him. As I turned my fear and doubt over to him, over time I began to believe in his goodness again. There wasn't a moment where I suddenly believed, but a gradual revealing of himself to me anew, as I chose to trust his goodness in spite of the suffering I was faced with.

When I look back on this part of my journey, it is clear to me that my despair was birthed from a deficiency of hope in God's goodness and in his love for me. I could not see a good end to the story. I know that mental health issues played a role in my spiritual struggles and I'm not trying to minimize that. But I wonder if I had known then what I know now, would things have played out differently?

Will you step with me again into John's vision? Take some time to walk these eternal streets and ask our Savior to meet you there. Read this passage slowly and allow yourself to imagine yourself in this perfect New Jerusalem, this good ending to the story.

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there." Revelation 21:22-25



Day 8

When we returned from Indonesia, as God began to heal me in mind and heart, I began to wonder what he was calling me to next. James 1:27 leapt out at me from the page: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..."

Long story short, over time it became clear to me that God was calling our family to foster. This journey of loving kids in care and their single moms has been incredibly challenging but also so good! It felt very important to me from early on that I pray for the moms and form relationships with them. Consequently, my heart was torn as I grew to love these children as my own but also felt God's heart for their mothers' lives to be healed and for them to be reunited with their little ones. With each reunification would come a season of grieving in increments, keeping in contact with their moms and trying to provide support for as long as possible. In each case, the mother eventually moved or changed her phone number, making it impossible for me to remain in their lives. I have loved and lost 3 children, each made uniquely in the image of God. Placing these children and their families into the hands of the Father has been difficult and heartbreaking, but still remains both the hardest but best thing God has called me to.

Jaxon first came into our home at 3 months of age and returned to us again at 9 months. Now at 5 years of age, it has become clear that our home is his forever one, but we are struggling to obtain permanency for him. The only missing piece in this arduous process is a signature on a letter from the Chief of his reserve. The band representative says that the fact that the band has not contested Jaxon staying with us is implied consent but unfortunately this is not enough for Child and Family Services. We cannot obtain private guardianship without that elusive signature.

I have prayed often that God would move the Chief's heart and hand in this. And yet Jaxon's file remains in limbo. We love him as our own child, yet the government does not recognize his permanency with us. Although all his day-to-day care is delegated to us, we are not in control of his future.

But God *is* in control and trusting Him with these precious ones continues to be a part of the journey. Does hope change anything in Jaxon's tenuous permanency process? This is a hope in a God who is working to bring about a new heaven and a new earth, a 'more like the real thing' reality: where every tear will be wiped away, where injustice will have no place and we will all know God's love. So that means I can trust that the God who "sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:6) will continue the work of bringing peace on earth and goodwill to all! I hope in a God who has been working very specifically in Jaxon's life since his conception, and will continue to set things right. I am not saying that I have never struggled with fear and doubt in the midst of this. But I am saying that I can continuously place this fear before a mighty and infinitely loving God.

"I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content. Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore." (Psalm 131)

What uncertainty do you carry that God is asking you to lay before him? The God who is your Maker longs to transform whatever encumbers you into certain hope. Place yourself in these arms of perfect love. Allow God to calm and quiet your whole being as a child held safe. Put your hope in the Lord, now and always.

Day 9

I love the final story from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (by Sally Lloyd-Jones) and its child-like perception.

"John was one of Jesus' helpers. He was old now and living on an island, which might sound nice except it was a prison. (The Leaders put him there to stop him from talking about Jesus, but I'm sure you don't think a little thing like being in a cell, in a prison, on an island, in the middle of an ocean, could stop God's plan, do you?). One morning, Jesus appeared - right there, in John's cell. Jesus' eyes were bright, shining like the sun. 'I am going to show you a secret, John,' Jesus said, 'about when I come back.' His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 'Write down what you see so God's children can read it, and wait with happy excitement."

Then Jesus gave John a beautiful dream - except John was wide awake and what he saw was real and one day it would all come true...and he wrote: I see a throne. And on the throne is a King. And the King is Jesus. All around the throne people are bowing down. They are giving him their treasures. There are loud cheers and clapping, clapping and bright laughter like a thousand waterfalls and everyone bursts out singing a new song! 'This is our King! The Lamb who died, so we don't have to - our Rescuer. All Honor and Glory! Forever and ever.' And every creature everywhere, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, join in...

And I see Satan - God's horrible enemy - thrown down, defeated. I see a sparkling city shimmering in the sky: glittering, glowing - coming down! Heaven is coming down to earth! God's city is beautiful. Walls of topaz, jasper, sapphire. Wide streets paved with gold. Gleaming pearl gates that are never locked shut. Where is the sun? Where is the moon? They aren't needed anymore. God is all the Light people need. No more darkness! No more night!

And the King says, 'Look! God and his children are together again. No more running away. Or hiding. No more crying or being lonely or afraid. No more being sick or dying. Because all those things are gone. Yes, they're gone forever. Everything sad has come untrue. And see - I have wiped every tear from every eye!' And then a deep, beautiful voice that sounded like thunder in the sky says 'Look, I am making everything new!'

And so we sing this advent season:

**"O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the son of God appear...
O come, Thou Dayspring,
Come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And Death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee O Israel."**

He has come and we long for him to come again! Emmanuel, God with us, who intimately knows and loves us in all our brokenness, longs to come and make everything new.

And let me assure you, "The Lord is not slow in

keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

This time of waiting is all part of his compassionate stance toward us, his beloved creation. Do not allow the longing to make you weary, but instead ask him to permeate your waiting with desire: to know the depth of his love toward creation and the uniqueness of his tender mercies toward you.

**"O come Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,
Fill all the world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee O Israel."**

Re-read John's vision from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* or listen to O Come O Come Emmanuel and imagine the joy of eternity in this deeply restored reality to come.



Day 10

This imagining eternity is not an escape from our current reality. We remember this as we reflect on how Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9-13).

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

In this prayer we recognize that our loving Father not only has a beautiful future in store for His creation, but is already active in bringing about His kingdom on earth here and now. When we pray 'your kingdom come' we recognize our role in this bringing of heaven to earth...we not only ask God to do it, but we articulate our desire to be a part of it.

"Why do people litter, mom?" Jaxon asks me as we pass garbage on the way home from the playground. "I don't know Jax, but we can take care of God's creation by picking it up." (And then washing our hands really well after!)

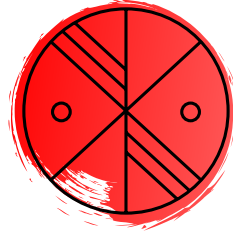
"Why are we putting some of our groceries in that bin?" Jaxon asks as we place them in the food bank box by the door of Safeway. "So that people who don't have a lot of money will have enough to eat."

"I'm worried that the polar bears won't have a home because we keep using too much electricity," says Jaxon, running around the house shutting off lights (even in rooms I'm using!)

Small kingdom glimpses of living out God's desire for creation: attempts to join Him in bringing His reign to earth, even as we long for the fullness of His Shalom (ie. peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, fulfillment).

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy...Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping carrying seed to sow will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with them" (Psalm 126).

Imagine God's will done fully on earth as it is in heaven, this day. Not a separation of ourselves from the world, but the grounding of God's true and perfect plan, restoring all things to himself. The kingdom came near in the Christ child, and it continues through us. In what small way can you and I bring about God's kingdom on earth? I invite you to pray through the Lord's Prayer slowly, taking time between each line. Write down any thoughts that emerge during or after your meditation. Invite God to show you how you might bring the kingdom near this day.



Day 11

*“Come Thou long expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.”*

This advent hymn aptly expresses the universal yearning of humankind. While it is true that many do not recognize their longings, and that even if they do, they attempt to fill those desires with something other than God, the truth remains. As Augustine distills it: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

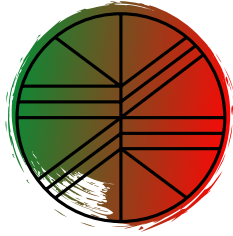
Come with me back to the new Narnia and hear the words of the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling: “He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried: ‘I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it til now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.’”

Do these words not touch something at our core? As Christmas Day approaches our lives may be busy with fun and laughter or they may be full of the weight of lists and expectations we can’t seem to get a handle on. We may be anticipating Christmas with joy and excitement or we may be plagued by loneliness and grief. As flip sides of the same coin, joy and grief both direct us to eternity. Joy, that goodness and beauty will be augmented beyond our wildest dreams. And grief, totally eradicated, when we look into our Saviour’s eyes and know him fully, even as we are fully known. It will be a complete coming home, a lavish outpouring of the Saviour’s love and perfection.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 2:1-3)

So I invite you to long for the day of Christ’s appearing: when all that inhabits our minds and hearts will be drawn up into his love and we will be purified and made whole, thoroughly at home in his presence. Take some time to re-read the words of love from 1 John. Speak to God of those gifts in life that will be enlarged and perfected and allow yourself to imagine the joy! Surrender any sorrows to him, knowing that these will be fully extinguished in the light of his extravagant love.

Come Thou long expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free; From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee.



Day 12

As we come to the end of these reflections, I invite you to remember that the pull we feel when we listen to our favorite song, glance out the window at Christmas lights, go for a walk through freshly fallen snow, read our favorite book, or have coffee with a friend point us to something more: something deeper, something wider, something infinite.

Perhaps you're not as much of a 'feeler' as I am, but we all experience 'thin places,' a Celtic Christian term for moments when the distance between heaven and earth seems much smaller than usual. Although birth and death are often the most significant ones, I invite you to seek out those everyday 'thin places' this Christmas, and allow them to draw you near to the heart of God. Allow me to express to you again, that as the Father spoke a blessing over Jesus, he speaks the same blessing over you: "You are my Beloved Child, on you my favor rests."

So, dear child of the Father, notice this voice, nudging you in quiet moments of beauty or shouting out to you in moments of pain! And remember that this is not all there is. There is an eternity to come...and it is more.

I want to close with C.S. Lewis's conclusion to the Narnia series. I invite you to read it with an open stance, asking God's Spirit to transform your mind and heart this season through hope. May these words ignite your desire for Christ, and fuel your longing for eternity.

"As Aslan spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and so beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story.

All their life in the world and their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Come, Lord Jesus.