

Journey to Joy

AN ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL
FOR FAMILIES



KATE WICKER

Introduction

During one particularly exhausting Advent, my son Thomas—then a toddler—grabbed a shiny glass ball ornament and hurled it across the room where it shattered into many colorful shards. Before I'd even had the chance to clean up the first mess, he exclaimed, "Ball!" and promptly chucked another one.

At that moment, I recall feeling a lot like those ornaments—broken and not sure if I'd ever feel whole (or well-rested) again.

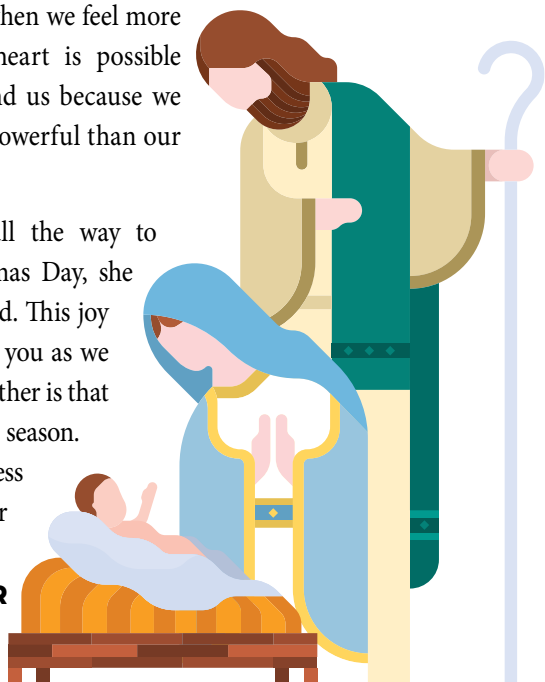
One of my daughters sensed my weariness and repeated an oft-spoken adage in our family. "Mama, don't let anyone steal your joy!"

That might be easier said than done, but in this season of Advent, an abiding joy in Jesus is ours for the taking, yet it must be distinguished from happiness.

We might feel happy if we get exactly what we want for Christmas, for happiness is usually based on the external. But *joy*? Joy is soul-deep, rooted in our Lord and Savior, Jesus. True joy rises up within us even when our Advents—or our lives—aren't glittery gold, even when we feel more broken than whole. A joyful heart is possible despite what is happening around us because we know God is faithful and more powerful than our circumstances.

Mary carried joy within her all the way to Bethlehem and then, on Christmas Day, she bore JOY HIMSELF into the world. This joy is ours. *He* is ours. My prayer for you as we embark on this journey to joy together is that you find the grace of this hopeful season. Trust in the sweetness and goodness of Jesus and don't let anyone—or anything—steal your joy.

—KATE WICKER



Less Fuss and More Jesus

Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

MARK 13:35-37

PONDER Today marks the first day of Advent. This season is about being prepared for Jesus—not just your guests for the holiday party. We know what virtuous preparation *should* look like: Today is the day we start praying more. Now is the time to cultivate a more peaceful, joyful heart. Yet for me, it doesn't take long to forget that Jesus is the Prince of Peace—not the Prince of a Hyperventilating Stress Ball (that would be me).

During this super-busy time, it's easy to take the call to “keep awake” too literally. We skimp on sleep, not to mention prayer time, to tackle ALL. THE. THINGS. But that's not what Advent is about. It's certainly not what Jesus is about. God doesn't need a calendar brimming with potlucks, perfect gifts or a Martha Stewart home to be adored. All he desires is us—holiday dress optional. A truly joyful Advent requires less fuss and more Jesus.

PRAY Jesus, help me to be spiritually awake and to carve out time to spend with you. Amen.

ACT Sit down as a family and make plans for Advent. What are some things you absolutely must do? What can you skip to help create more margins in your life to stay awake to the joy that is Christ?

Steps to Humility

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

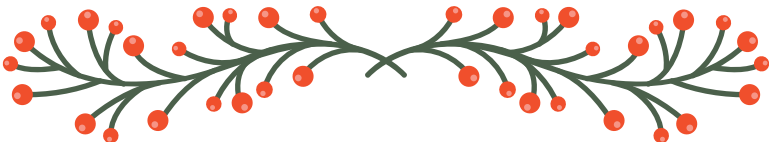
MICAH 6:8

PONDER What is required of us as followers of Christ? To choose to do what is right, to be kind and to embrace humility. It's as simple and as difficult as that. Choosing what's right in a wayward world can be challenging. Choosing kindness—even toward the person who cuts you off in traffic or the peer who takes credit for your work on a project—can require Herculean effort. If you do happen to consistently be a moral, kind person to everyone you encounter, don't expect accolades, recognition or even a thank-you. Instead, walk humbly with God. Ouch. No wonder we so fiercely need Jesus to help us along in our journey.

Advent is a call to action. These weeks afford us a special opportunity to work at being better Christians. Take small steps toward holiness. Smile at strangers. Invite the schoolmate who might not be uber-popular to play during recess. Then pray for enough humility to allow God to increase while you and your own wants decrease.

PRAY Lord, help me to be the kind of Christian that does as you require, and when I fall short, give me the grace and mercy to pick myself up and try again. Amen.

ACT Complete a task or chore that you or a loved one dreads, and don't tell anyone you did it.



Be a Light

The night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

ROMANS 13:12

PONDER Advent is a time of preparation. There are trees to decorate, meals to serve, cookies to bake and gifts to wrap, but above all, this season is a time to prepare our homes and our hearts for Jesus. One way to do that is to bring light to others. The infant Christ reminded us, when he was born on a cold, dark night among smelly animals, that there will be glimmers of light even in the darkest, most stressful moments. Jesus comes to us as a baby to bring a joyful dawn to us all. He is the Morning Star.

How do we respond to the gift that is Jesus? By stepping out of the darkness and putting on an “armor of light,” by being hopeful, by being faithful in prayer during the happy moments and the darker ones, by keeping our eyes fixed on the Light of the World. This Advent, allow something beautiful and hopeful to unfurl deep within you.

PRAY God, sometimes just being a human being in this broken world makes me feel like I’m shrouded in darkness. Give me a hopeful, light-seeking heart. Show me how to always be a light that helps snuff out the darkness. Amen.

ACT If you haven’t already, display your Advent wreath or make one with your family.

Visit www.catechist.com/the-christmas-wreath to learn more about the symbolism behind the Advent wreath.



Simple Invitations

Better is a dry morsel with quiet
than a house full of feasting with strife.

PROVERBS 17:1

PONDER A friend of mine once showed up unexpectedly at my doorstep. I immediately apologized for my messy home and appearance (I resembled a yeti at that particular moment). “I’m not here to judge you. I’m here to love you,” she responded.

“Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). You know what else it covers? Toy clutter. Mismatched shoes sprinkled across the floor. Dust bunnies. And a disheveled, imperfect hostess (me).

We live in an image-obsessed culture, and we often use everything from the décor of our homes to our physical appearance as a benchmark of our success or worth. This is especially true during this time of year when we might feel pressure to create perfect experiences for the people we love instead of helping them learn how to navigate an imperfect world.

Sadly, the simple beauty of an ordinary gathering of friends can be lost because we too often feel our homes—or we ourselves—are too inadequate to share with others.

While we may not be able to completely eradicate unrealistic expectations that social media, airbrushed magazine covers and advertising place upon us, we can change what we value and how we view hospitality.

This Advent, make room in the inn that is your “good enough” home.

PRAY Lord, I want to give priority to togetherness over a tidy home or perfect meal. Give me a generous heart that seeks being humble over being fussy. Amen.

ACT Invite some neighbors or friends over for tea and coffee—no fancy place settings required.

Recognizing God's Goodness

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:9

PONDER Every year my family prepares for Saint Nicholas Day (December 6), a holiday we celebrate because of our German heritage. When my children awake, they will dash to their stockings in hopes of finding tiny treats and trinkets. What would happen if their stockings were empty? My youngest child, Charlie, might cry. Isn't that what I have done when I've been faced with the unexpected—like my pregnancy with Charlie? When I first discovered I was pregnant with my fifth child, my eyes filled with anxious tears. I wasn't sure what God was asking of me. Fast-forward six years, and I'm a mom to a high school senior all the way down to a kindergartner—and I wouldn't have it any other way. While my limited human heart could not conceive the joy Charlie would bring to our family, God knew what he was doing.

Trusting God is terribly difficult, especially when we can't see or recognize the good in a situation. What are you afraid of at this very moment? What are your biggest disappointments? Can you recognize God's goodness even when life doesn't feel so good? Are you willing to lead a life marked by joy and contentment even when you find the stockings empty?

PRAY Jesus, I trust in you. Amen.

ACT Draw a picture or find a photo that makes you feel hopeful and reminds you of God's love for you. Display it in a prominent place. Each time you see it, pray the prayer above.



Anticipating Christ's Return

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

MATTHEW 24:44

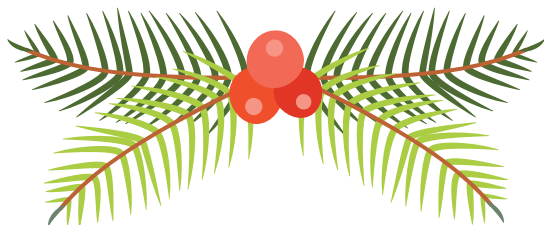
PONDER During Advent, we are not only waiting and preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus but also anticipating Christ to come again. Honestly, the Second Coming can make me a little anxious. It's tempting to view Scripture urging us to be ready for the Lord through an almost end-of-the-world lens: *You'd better get your act together. The clock is ticking.*

But God doesn't want us to preoccupy ourselves with getting our affairs in order or fret about what tomorrow may hold. What he really desires is for us to find joy—and him—in the ordinariness of life and to be open to the awareness of his constant presence.

Let us prepare for Jesus' birth and the day he returns to us, but let's also not get so caught up in the *doing* or the worrying that we miss out on the present and the gift of Jesus *now*.

PRAY Jesus, mold me into a person who is always open and ready for you. Amen.

ACT To remind your family that we should always be preparing for Jesus and seeking him, leave an empty crèche in a visible area of your home. Then on Christmas morning, have everyone look for the Baby Jesus (which you've hidden somewhere in the home). When Baby Jesus is found, place him in the crèche.



Be on Guard

He said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

LUKE 12:15

PONDER Despite what the stores might be telling us, this season is more about giving, and the best gift to receive is Jesus’ gift of peace. Yet, our culture tends to put a lot of emphasis on the accumulation of things. So how do we see past the holiday hoopla, the mass commercialism and the chronic cases of the *gimmies* that begin to plague us before the Thanksgiving leftovers are even consumed? By reminding ourselves that the material things do not make us happy—at least not in the long run. More than hankering over the latest toy, *très chic* shoes or high-tech gadget, what we really must seek daily is Christ, hidden and quiet, lying in a dusty manger and tucked away in the mucky corners of our hearts.

PRAY Jesus, the peace and joy you offer are at the top of my wish list this year. Amen.

ACT This Advent, don’t have your kids only send letters to the North Pole. Have them write a *Christkind* letter as well. This is an Austrian tradition in which children and adults alike pen a letter to the Christ Child that shares not only a wish list but also spiritual resolutions. Legend has it that the guardian angel of the letter’s scribe delivers the letter to Baby Jesus.



Journey to Joy

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL FOR FAMILIES



The focus of this Advent devotional for families is joy, the kind of joy that is soul-deep, rooted in our Lord and Savior, Jesus. True joy can rise up within us even when our Advents—or our lives—aren't glittery-gold, and even when we feel more broken than whole. A joyful heart is possible despite what is happening around us because we know God is faithful and more powerful than our circumstances. With Bible-based reflections to ponder, prayers to pray and simple faith-based actions, author Kate Wicker helps families journey to the joy of Jesus' birth throughout the Advent season.



Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition*. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

By Kate Wicker. Design by Jamie Wyatt. Images: Adobe Stock © 2023 Creative Communications for the Parish, a division of Bayard, Inc. 1564 Fencorp Dr., Fenton, MO 63026. www.creativecommunications.com. 800-325-9414. All rights reserved. Printed in the USA.

JJ4