

The Gift of a Fresh Start



Advent 2017

Advent - The Gift of a Fresh Start

The Advent season is a time of preparation for the coming anew of the Christ Child - Ad - vent, "coming to." We are preparing for what lies ahead. We have hopes and expectations. As we prepare, we can also take an active role in planning for the birth of new possibilities in our lives and our world. Our community is in need of our efforts and commitments. Yes, we are busy at this time of year. We can choose to worry or we can think of this time as an adventure. Some questions might help us reflect upon this season

What am I thirsting for?

How is God's love nurturing and supporting me?

What is God calling me to be and to do as I reflect God's light within me and beyond?

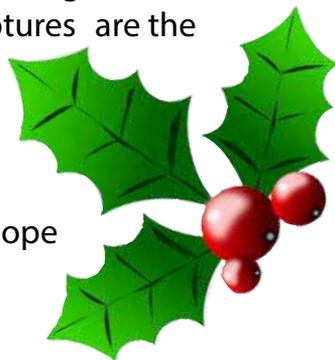
What brings me joy?

What can I do to make room for new possibilities in my life?

Where are the places where I might bring my gifts and talents for new life?

What can I do to build a stronger, more loving community in my own life and my town?

In the spirit of the season, this booklet of readings is offered as a support for your spiritual journey. The scriptures are the New Revised Standard Version. Read these scriptures, poems, and stories on their date or whenever you are moved. Consider prayerfully the questions that come up for you with each one. Enjoy this season with hope in your hearts for the new life and surprises ahead.



November 26

Community with Hope

Theme: In the end, it is God's work to do. Our job is only to come as thirsty, thirsting people

Scripture Isaiah 55: 1-13

55 Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

6 Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;

7 let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12 For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.



November 27

Advent God, will you come with a chill in the air?

Advent God, will you come with a public service announcement?

Advent God, will you come with rescue packages, food baskets, unwrapped toys?

Advent God, will you come with labor pains, stable odors, travel blisters?

Advent God, even though there is trouble in the land, send angels of good news and great joy.

Advent God, there is beauty in children's smiles, in the shape of winter-bare trees, in the decorations of the season, in a glass of clean water. There is beauty in the human heart, in the caring of people, in the making of friends where only strangers existed. There is beauty in forgiveness practiced, apologies offered, and love extended. Send choirs with songs of joy for the beauty of this life.

From Pray the Seasons by Arthur Gafke

November 28

What Healing Do I Need?

By Joyce Rupp



The people brought their wounded to Jesus and laid them at his feet, trusting that his presence and his touch would bring them a better quality of life.

These people were given new sight, limbs that worked again, a voice where all had been silent, and good health instead of disease.

Advent is a season of hopeful growth, a time when we can bring to God what is wounded in us and ask for restoration. It is a good time to pause and ask: What is there within my life that I need to bring to the feet of Jesus for healing? Has any part of my life gone lame? Has my enthusiasm waned? My trust in others broken? My energy to do good depleted? Have I been blind to things that need tending in my spirit? Is there a relationship out of place that needs to be restored? Have I lost a voice in what ought to be spoken to another?

*I come to you today, Divine Healer,
and lay my life at your feet.*

May I be healed of what limits me.

Help me to be spiritually healthy.

November 29

When Someone Deeply Listens by John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.

When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

November 30

We need hope for the realizations of our dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imaginations... All transformations begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on our desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty are better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk... Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hopes calls for action; action is impossible without hope... To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.

Hope is a door, or rather a vision of a door, a belief in a way forward... Hope is a kind of birth - it doesn't come out of what went before, it comes out *in spite of* what went before.

from Hope in the Dark by Rebecca Solnit



December 1

The Opening of Eyes by David Whyte

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.
It is the vision of far off things

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

December 2

TOO BUSY for Christmas??

by Cricket

This past weekend found me in the attic, dragging out the boxes of Christmas decorations, yet again, and wondering whether all this was really worth it with us being so busy this year.

But, while up in the attic I came across a small street lamp. The lamp was 7 inches tall, made of metal painted red, and had real glass windows. It had a wick in the middle of the lamp post, and one of the windows opened to allow someone to light the wick. It was from my grandmother and grandfather's Christmas garden. Looking at the scale of the thing, I wondered how big the rest of the village must have been. I was holding in my hand a link with history, with my ancestors, and with the time honored tradition of celebrating Christmas.

The lamp, a vessel for light, had survived probably 90 years and was now in my care. Too fragile to use, I took it downstairs to the dining room and placed it on one of the shelves in the china cabinet. There it stood, as a reminder of the light we bring into our homes each Christmas season with candles in the windows, lights on the trees, and outside on our houses and bushes. And, yes, I decided, it was worth it to drag all the stuff out of the attic and set it up, again; only this time, each thing I took out of a box, I dusted off and held with more gratitude for what it represented. And I remembered my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles and my cousins and extended family who all played a part in the growing of the Christmas traditions we celebrate each year. And that the light which metaphorically shines in that little street lamp in the china closet is the light of Love __ the love of family and friends, and the love of God. I will enjoy Christmas this year, busy or not!

December 3

Restart Love

Theme: God's love is the light of the world – it can restart anything, even our lives together.

Scripture Isaiah 9:1-7

9 [a] But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

2 [b] The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it

with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

December 4

Making Room for God's Love by Joyce Rupp

The busyness and pressure of the last few days before Christmas sometimes leaves our heart feeling anything but expansive and open. Fatigue and stress have often left us feeling grumpy and distraught, with harsh words and nasty judgments waiting to leap out of our mouths. The doorway to the heart at those times is very tiny. Christmas draws near. It is time to check the size of our heart-door and see if it needs some expanding to let the God of glory enter in.

December 5

What kind of life will we have? A human birth is a breathtaking gift. This singular life is a pearl of great price. How will we use this precious time? Sloppily careening from one day to the next, getting things done, checking off lists, buttressing our lives against trouble as best we can, until we die weary and wondering whether we were ever awake, ever truly alive at all? Or shall we live not by accident, but on purpose - naming clearly and courageously those things we cherish, creating a life of beauty and love?

Will we walk on the earth gently? Will we care for our children with understanding and wisdom? Will we seek out beauty and give thanks for it? Will we be patient and thoughtful with others? Will we be courageous in speaking what we know to be true? Will we be awake and alive? Will we leave a legacy of kindness?... How shall we live?

from How then shall we live?
by Wayne Muller

December 6

A friend can be someone you have known all your life or someone you met a week ago or someone you never met except through a book or a beautiful movie or a play or a piece of music. Or someone who has served as a role model and made you proud to be a fellow human being. My friends include Monet and Mozart, Arthur Miller, Thomas Wolfe, Louisa May Alcott, Eleanor Roosevelt and a hundred other beings who have lifted my spirits and made me more than I was before they touched my life. They remind me that friendship is the source of love and growth, whatever form it may take.

Eda LeShan

December 7

Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light by Jan Richardson

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

Blessed are you
in whom
the light lives, in whom
the brightness blazes –
your heart-door
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
in that light that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

December 8

God, we are one with You. You have made us one with You. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, You dwell in us. Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no understanding where there is mutual rejection. Oh God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept You, and we thank You, and we adore You, and we love You with our whole being, because our being is in Your being, our spirit is rooted in Your spirit. Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen

Thomas Merton

December 9

I will light the candle of hope this Christmas.... Hope is the mood of Christmas; the raw materials are a newborn babe, a family, and work. Even in the grimness of war, babies are being born - an endless procession that is life's answer to death. Life keeps coming one, keeps seeking to fulfill itself, keeps affirming the possibility of hope.

Hope is the growing edge! I shall look well to that growing edge this Christmas. All around, worlds are dying out, new worlds are being born; all around life is dying but life is being born. The fruit ripens on the trees, while the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge! It is the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life. It is the incentive to carry on. Therefore, I will light the candle of hope this Christmas, that must burn all the year long.

From The Inward Journey by Howard Thurman

December 10

Restart Joy

Theme: Mary and Elizabeth find a new reality unfolding among them, and a new community between them.

Scripture

Luke 1: 39-45

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."



December 11



Angel-Filled Advent by Ann Weems

Wouldn't it be wonderful

if Advent came filled with angels and
alleluias?

Wouldn't it be perfect

if we were greeted on these December mornings
with a hovering of heavenly hosts
tuning their harps and brushing up on their fa-la-las?

Wouldn't it be incredible

if their music filled our waking hours
with the promise of peace on earth
and if each Advent night we dreamed of nothing but goodwill?

Wouldn't we be ecstatic

if we could take those angels shopping,
or trim the tree or have them hold our hands
and dance through our houses decorating?

And, oh, how glorious it would be

to sit in church next to an angel
and sing our hark-the-heralds!

What an Advent that would be!

But in lieu of that,

perhaps we can give thanks
for the good earthly joys we have been given
and for the earthly "angels" that we know
who do such a good job of filling
our Advent with alleluias!



December 12

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till... nations were at peace.
God came when the heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. God did not wait
till hearts were pure. In joy God came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's Light would not go out.
God came to a world that did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Madeleine L'Engle

December 13

There must be always remaining in every one's life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful, and by an inherent prerogative, throws all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness, something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning – then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory; old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

Howard Thurman

December 14

I was sitting on a beach one day, watching two children playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sand castle at the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.

I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the waves will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.

From [When all You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough](#)

by Harold Kushner

December 15

For Joy by Jan Richardson

You can prepare,
but still

It will come to you
by surprise,

crossing through your doorway,
calling your name in greeting,
turning like a child
who quickens suddenly
within you.

It will astonish you
how wide your heart
will open
in welcome.

for the joy
that finds you
so ready
and still so
unprepared.



December 16

We Share the Same River by Mark Nepo

I was traveling in South Africa and felt very tender one morning, when my friend Kim came upon me as I was weeping. She asked if I was okay. I told her it was only the waters of life splashing up on my shore. Later that day, I found her near tears and checked in with her. She said, "The river's now in me."

We looked into each others eyes and realized that we all share the same river. It flows beneath us and through us, from one dry heart to the next. We share the same river. It makes the Earth one living thing.

The whole of life has a power to soften and open us, against our will, to irrigate our spirits, and in those moments, we discover that tears, the water from within, are a common blood, mysterious and clear. We may speak different languages and live very different lives, but when that deep water swells to the surface, it pulls us to each other.

We share the same river, and where it enters, we lose our stubbornness the way fists wear open when held under in the stream of love.



December 17

Restart Peace

Theme: In God's commonwealth, everyone gets a fresh (and equal) start. This is Good News for all.

Scripture Isaiah 40: 1-8, 27-31

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her

that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,

their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,

“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

December 18

Dear God,

Please send a miracle.

Into every country and every home, into every mind and every heart, may the power of Your spirit now trigger the light, activate our holiness, remind us of the truth within.

May a great love now encompass us, a deep peace give us solace.

For Lord, we live in fearful times, and we long for a new world.

We surrender what is, to the bonfire of Your genius.

Refine this metal.

Refashion our creations.

Remind us of the eternal truths.

Return to us our native grace.

Take back what we have kept and thus condemned.

For You are might, Lord, and can do what we cannot.

May the world be reborn.

Help us to forgive and leave the past behind us, the future to be delivered by You.

Hallelujah, for You have the power.

Praise and thanksgiving, for You use it to save us, to heal us, to lift us from the past.

And we accept.

Thank you very much.

Amen

Marianne Williamson

December 19

When my daughter was small she got the dubious part of the Bethlehem star in the Christmas play. After her first rehearsal she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board.

“What exactly will you be doing in the play?” I asked.

“I just stand there and shine,” she told me. I have never forgotten her response.

From When the Heart Waits
by Sue Monk Kidd

December 20

A sense of Mystery can take us beyond disappointment and judgment to a place of expectancy. It opens in us an attitude of listening and respect. If everyone has in them the dimension of the unknown, possibility is present at all times. Wisdom is possible at all times. The Mystery in anyone may speak to them and heal them anywhere they are. It may speak to us and heal us, too. Knowing this enables us to listen to life from the place in us that is Mystery also. Mystery requires that we relinquish an endless search for answers and become willing to not understand. That we may be open to witness. Those who witness life may eventually know far more than anyone can understand. Perhaps real wisdom lies in not seeking answers at all. Any answers we find will not be true for long. An answer is a place where we can fall asleep as life moves past us to its next questions. After all these years, I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers, but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company.

From My Grandfather's Blessings
by Rachel Naomi Remen

December 21

Christ has
No body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes
Though which is to look out
Christ's compassion in 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 now.

Saint Teresa d'Avila



December 22

Vision by Wendell Berry

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it...
then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides...

The river will run

clear, as we will never know it...

On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.

The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.

Families will be singing in the fields...

Memory,

native to this valley, will spread over it

like a grove, and memory will grow

into legend, legend into song, song

into sacrament. The abundance of this place,

the songs of its people and its birds,

will be health and wisdom and indwelling

light. This is no paradisaal dream.

Its hardship is its reality.



December 23

It is Not Over by Ann Weems

It is not over,

 this birthing.

There are always newer skies

 into which

 God can throw stars.

When we begin to think

 that we can predict the Advent God,

 that we can box the Christ Child

 in a stable in Bethlehem,

 that's just the time

 that God will be born

 in a place we can't imagine and won't believe.

Those who wait for God

 watch with their hearts and not their eyes,

 listening

 always listening

 for angel words.

December 24

Restart Grace

Where the Light Begins by Jan Richardson

Perhaps it does not begin.
Perhaps it is always.

Perhaps it takes
a lifetime
to open our eyes,
to learn to see
what has forever
shimmered in front of us –

the luminous line
of the map
in the dark,

the vigil flame
in the house
of the heart,

the love
so searing
we cannot keep
from singing,

from crying out,
in testimony
and praise.

Perhaps this day
will be the mountain
over which
the dawn breaks.

Perhaps we
will turn our face
toward it,
toward what has been
always.

Perhaps
our eyes
will finally open
in ancient recognition,
willingly dazzled,
illuminated at last.

Perhaps this day
the light begins
in us.

