



Advent

the gift of friendship

the advent
podcast
Katie Kibbe

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Introduction

I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

John 15:15 (NAB)

What is Advent exactly? If you were shopping on the Advent Calendar aisle at Target, you might think that Advent was a commercial invention, a way to sell more stuff and mark the 24 shopping days of December leading up to Christmas.

Advent is a Church season beginning on the 4th Sunday before Christmas. The exact number of days of Advent changes based upon what day of the week Christmas lands upon in the calendar.

This year in the United States, the first Sunday of Advent falls on the Sunday immediately following Thanksgiving. Translation: it feels like we rush from one thing right into another, rarely pausing to take a breath.

Why Advent? The four weeks before Christmas are a time of preparation and waiting. A few weeks set aside that allow us to gaze with expectant delight on the miracle which is the birth of Jesus.

In the Middle Ages, these weeks were lived in much the same way as we modern people live Lent. People adopted a penitential spirit, fasting as a way to recognize their need for a Savior. Over time, the practice of fasting during Advent fell by the wayside as the season shrunk from 40 days to 4 weeks.

I don't know about you, but December tends to be hectic. **Without an intentional practice baked into each day of Advent, I risk falling victim to exhaustion and overwhelm.**

If you're like me, you've started Advent in previous years with great intentions. And then life interrupts your best laid plans. The candles on the Advent wreath weren't lit, the bookmark in the Advent book never moved, and the retreat you wanted to attend was missed. You limped into Christmas even more disappointed in yourself. (Ask me how I know!)

Not this year, friend.

What good are grand plans if you can't follow through on them?

This year, I created something with you in mind. Along with the Advent podcast, I assembled a devotional. A way to prepare your heart in 5 minutes or less per day. Start small and seek joy!

The Advent podcast is the prayerful pause you need to prepare your hearts. During the next four weeks, we'll spend time each day with the people who were intimately involved in Christ's birth.

I don't know about you, but I forget that the people who were present for Christ's birth were more than one dimensional lives of words on a page. They were people, just like you and me. Each experienced joy and heartbreak. Each tripped over their words and checked their heart's motivations.

Each day, they learned more about God and His love through their friendships with other people. When we read between the lines, we discover that none of them was alone in God's story. Their paths were not always smooth in much the same way as we find our own paths. In large and small ways, these friends reveal the grounding power of Christ-Centered friendship - the power that our friends have to remind us who we are and whose we are.

This Advent, let's look at the Christmas story in a new light: the light of friendship. Over the course of Advent, we'll move from the most intimate circle of friendship-- our relationship with God-- out toward our largest circle of friendship, which includes our acquaintances.

For a few minutes each day, we'll pray with Scripture or ponder wise words from writers. Each day we'll discern one small thing we can do in order to share God's love with others.

So, join me, Katie Kibbe, as together we unpack the gift of Friendship this Advent.

Week One, Friendship with God

Sunday, the First Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:26-29 (NAB)

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

It's challenging to accurately imagine where Mary was when the angel Gabriel visited. I picture her in the same way a 17th-century artist painted the scene. Mary, in a castle, eyes downcast kneeling with a book in her hand. I think of this young girl surrounded by tapestries patiently waiting for God to arrive. As if she had some insight into the timing of this Divine appointment.

But how realistic is it to think that Mary was expecting Gabriel's visit? Or that his appearance was precisely timed to intersect with Mary's moment of prayer.

My life experience tells me that God's timing does not happen in a picture perfect way. Although Mary may have been surrounded by finished tapestries hanging nearby, the pattern of Mary's life was far from known to her. She could only do the same thing we do. Take the thread God handed her and weave her life alongside the lives of other people she encountered along the way.

God is full of surprises. And I have to think that Mary's circumstance is no exception.

In the midst of her surprise, she recognizes Gabriel. She processes her emotions and asks questions. In the middle of this conversation between a young girl and God's heavenly emissary, He is there.

And how does Mary respond?

Mary allows herself to be seen by God as she is: curious, confused, courageous. She does not retreat in panic. She does not contradict the angel. She ponders. She processes.

She sees herself as God sees her: Full of Grace in God's presence.

Her confusion does not prevent her from seeing herself through God's eyes of love.

This gentle reminder from an angel is one we can sit with for a few minutes: The Lord is with you.

In the midst of this busy run through the days of Advent, we have a daily opportunity to pause and remember these simple words: The Lord is with you.

The Lord is with you in the preparing.

The Lord is with you in the shopping and baking.

The Lord is with you in the worrying and the waiting.

The Lord is with you in each interaction with another person.

The Lord is with you in every up and down,

adding depth and dimension to your life's tapestry.

May you know His love and see yourself through His eyes: beautiful and beloved.

Monday, the First Week of Advent

"And let no one in choosing or testing friends weary of being attentive, since the fruit of this labor is the medicine of life and the most solid foundation of immortality."

St. Aelred

Spiritual Friendship

Often without realizing, we test whether a person is worthy of our trust before we can call them friends. Our attention waxes and wanes according to the busyness of life. Some relationships withstand these ups and downs of life. Others do not.

One thing is for sure, an investment in a friendship takes time to reap a lasting reward. Sadly, we are addicted to the instant. We praise the overnight success. We celebrate the home run hitters and feel like a base hit is a waste of time.

Our relationship with God is the most intimate and important one we will ever experience.

Here's a truth that is often hard for me to get my heart wrapped around: **His love remains steadfast regardless of my level of attentiveness.**

Our feelings are never good at measuring His Presence. Even when I'm not paying attention to Him, He's paying attention to me. Regardless of my busyness, distraction, worry, and anxiety, He waits patiently ready to remind me of my belovedness. Each time I return my heart to Him, He responds. Some days I can feel His movement, other days not so much.

And when we are attentive to our relationship with God, as St. Aelred reminds us, supernatural fruit grows. This fruit takes the form of peace, patience, kindness, generosity, courage and curiosity.

This fruit is useful in feeding all other relationships in our life.

As with any relationship, our attention is fertilizer to its growth. As you pause, take a moment to savor your belovedness. Just as Mary found favor with God, He sees you and is delighted with you. No matter what level of attention you have given Him, He patiently waits for your eyes to catch His loving gaze.

Tuesday, the First Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:30-33 (NAB)

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

From His throne in heaven

God arrived as a baby.

He placed Himself in His most authentic and vulnerable form of love

An utterly dependent infant.

Unadorned

Unclothed

Unafraid

He allowed Himself to be tended to

He accepted a body able to feel pain.

He arrived willing to listen, learn, and lead

A kingdom to which there is no end.

Wednesday, The First Week of Advent

In God's infinite wisdom, He created our bodies with internal systems to regulate the functioning of our organs. The desert mothers and fathers developed a practice of prayer that matched phrases with breathing, allowing the body to return to stillness and peace. What we now call "breath prayer" has been around for centuries.

Daily life takes a toll on our bodies and our minds. Incorporating breath prayer into your day is one way to return your attention to God while also inviting stillness to settle over you. Using the words of Scripture, you can reconnect with God.

In this breath prayer, we remember that we are like Mary, vessels created by God to carry Christ's love into the world. As you pray, remember that you are His beloved, His Divine masterpiece.

Take a moment to relax.

Remember that you are God's beloved one.

Rest in His care.

Breathe deeply and hold each breath for a count of 3. Inhale for 3, hold for 3, exhale for 3, remain empty for 3. Repeat.

As you inhale, pray:

Behold

Hold this breath, pray:

I am

As you exhale, pray:

Your beloved

Hold this emptiness

Vessel

Thursday, The First Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:34-38 (NAB)

But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Mary was not afraid to ask God questions. Through the angel, God delivered what Mary needed. Information. Confirmation. Consolation. In all He gave her His most precious gift, the gift of Friendship. A friendship deeply personal and unique to her.

In all things He pointed her toward relationship with others. He points her toward Elizabeth. He speaks to Joseph about her in a dream. He captures the imagination of the Magi with a star. He sends angels with a message to the shepherds. All of these people connect with Mary, confirming God's love for her.

It's tempting to think that we should navigate the rocky road of our life's journey on our own. A fierce independence is rewarded with admiration.

Yet, this Christmas story reveals the interdependence of each person. God does not seek a relationship with Mary separate and apart.

Mary is not left on her own. Gabriel points her to Elizabeth. Her cousin, an insignificant woman who may have felt forgotten by God. Elizabeth is set to have a baby too. Now these women are linked by more than kinship, they are to be united by miracles. This news leaves Mary curious.

God invites our questions. He has placed curiosity within you for a reason. Allow your curiosity to point you in the right direction. Ask Him how you can prepare your heart for Christmas.

I'll leave you with one question today: Whose lives are united to yours by miracles?

Friday, The First Week of Advent

The light shed by any good relationship illuminates all relationships.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Gift from the Sea

There are times when God's presence is as tangible as the summer sun warming my skin. I feel His glow emanating from me as I visit with a friend or neighbor. I have more patience to deal with challenging phone calls or sticky situations that pop up.

At times, God feels distant, like a candle flickering in the corner. It can feel as if all of life's problems are entirely up to me to fix.

After paying attention to all of the ups and downs, I believe this to be true: Whether I can sense God or not, He remains present.

Now, I have pondered Mary's relationship with God, a lot. I've been curious for a long time about what allowed Mary to recognize the angel Gabriel so immediately. What allowed her to confidently ask questions and remain calm enough to listen to the answers. She was not hyperventilating in the corner nor was she overcome with the vapors when Gabriel arrived.

Here is what I have concluded: Mary was confident in her role as Jesus' mother because of the time she spent preparing her heart *with* God. Mary glowed in each and every encounter with other people because of her relationship with God.

As Lindbergh reminds us, a good relationship shines light on all other relationships. In order to have a good relationship, we must exert effort and time. As we invest time in being *with* God, we're filled and fueled to pour into our relationships with others.

We can trust that God remains, it is only our perception of Him that waxes and wanes.

This Advent, as we pay particular attention to our friendships, I'd love for each of us to open more space in our own heart for friendship with God.

Today, ponder one small thing you can do to invest in your relationship with God? And by small, I mean 30 seconds to 1 minute. If He feels distant, is there a spiritual practice you can pick up that sounds appealing? If He feels close, how can you bask in His light in order to be fueled to love others well?

Saturday, The First Week of Advent

God revealed his vulnerability, born as a baby in a manger. Jesus arrived that you and I might know what it looks like to be in a friendship relationship with God rather than maintaining an employee status.

In this story we see Mary saying yes to vulnerability by becoming a vessel, carrying Jesus.

Here are some questions for us to Ponder today:

Am I able to be my authentic, vulnerable self with God?

How would I respond if Gabriel came to me and said that I was full of grace?

Consider writing out your answer to these questions.

Week Two, Friendship in Kinship

Sunday, The Second Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:39-40 (NAB)

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

Gabriel gives Mary a lot of information when he invites her to cooperate with God's plan.

Mary has a startling before and after story. She wakes in the morning an unremarkable young girl from a small town waiting to be married to Joseph. I imagine that everyone thought of her in the same way they thought of every other young girl in her family, friend group, and community. Unremarkable.

By that evening, she's an oddball. The only one in her town that is young, unwed, and pregnant. A young girl whose status could now subject her to being stoned to death. She carries a stigma that she won't be able to hide for long.

Although she is confident in God, I imagine Mary worried about how to explain what has happened in this one day. Who would believe that she was to be the mother of the Savior of the world. Who would hear her story and look at her with eyes of love and respect rather than condemnation and scorn?

So Mary rushes to Judah, holding fast to the thread of information Gabriel gave her. At least her cousin who was older and unable to have children would understand what it was like to be an outsider. Mary had seen how Elizabeth had been treated by the other women in the past. Now they were both in the same boat with miracle boys on the way.

Alone is the worst place to be. God created our hearts and minds with a longing to connect with other people. When we feel as though no one can understand our situation, our emotional pain intensifies.

God knew that both Mary and Elizabeth would need help. They each needed someone who would understand their emotions. They each needed another to laugh and cry with, a friend who was also pregnant under miraculous circumstances.

We need friends too. Sometimes we find these friendships in our family of origin or in a trusted older woman. In times of confusion and celebration, life is better when we have someone else to share it with.

What amazing gifts God has given each of us through our friendships.

Today, can you reach out to a family member or friend who has been in the same boat with you during a difficult day or season?

Monday, The Second Week of Advent

"A true loyal friend sees nothing in his friend but his heart". Aelred of Rievaulx

True, loyal friendships are rare.

Friendship often takes many years of welcoming and being welcomed by the other person in order to develop and deepen. Some friendships flourish within the bonds of kinship. Others come from connections made in school, sports teams, and clubs.

Like you, I've developed friendships face to face and in virtual spaces.

It's nearly impossible to walk into a room full of strangers and predict which friendships will form and deepen. One thing is for sure though, both people need to be open and available to the relationship.

At some point when talking to another person, we might experience a spark of recognition, a moment when we are seen. In turn, we see the other person as more than their external appearance and list of accomplishments.

I like to think of this moment as a meeting of the hearts rather than a meeting of the minds. A friendship is formed not because we agree on everything, but because we love.

Mary and Elizabeth's bonds of friendship formed through their bonds of kinship. But kinship was not enough, on its own, to create their friendship. It took time, effort, and shared circumstances.

It was important for Mary to venture toward Elizabeth and for Elizabeth to receive Mary. They passed their intangible gifts of availability, authenticity, and vulnerability back and forth with each other. They saw each other's hearts.

They listened and laughed while spending time with each other. Within that space, the Holy Spirit worked freely. The threads of their lives weaving together to add to the beauty of each of their life tapestries.

As St. Aelred reminds us, "a true loyal friend sees nothing in his friend but his heart". In this busy season, may we take time to look past appearances and look to the heart. May we seek to find what we share in common rather than focusing on what divides.

Tuesday, The Second Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:41-43 (NAB)

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

An outsider journeying so far.
Young, dusty. Hoping to remain unseen.
Why am I so thirsty?
Confident one moment, confused the next.
Tired.
Why am I so weary?
Alone, yet surrounded by people.
Bearing the most sacred secret ever to be held.
Will I be welcomed after journeying so far?
Shivering in the dark. I knock.
A door opens a crack.
Recognized. Rejoiced over. Embraced.
Love pours into every part of my parched body.
Words are not needed.
My heart is full.
I am seen, once again.

I can't believe this has happened.
Graying hair. Full of wisdom. Invisible.
Why am I so thirsty?
Confident one moment, confused the next.
Tired.
I've never felt weariness like this before.
Alone, yet surrounded by people.
Carrying the second best secret ever to be held.
Who will understand what I am going through?
Passing by the front door. I hear a sound.
It's becoming harder to open this heavy door.
She's here, glowing under a halo of starlight.
Love pours into every part of my parched body.
Words are not needed.
My heart is full.
I am seen, once again.

Wednesday, The Second Week of Advent

In God's infinite wisdom, He created our bodies with internal systems to regulate the functioning of our organs. The desert mothers and fathers developed a practice of prayer that matched phrases with breath allowing the body to return to stillness and peace. What we now call "breath prayer" has been around for centuries.

The busyness of everyday life can lull our souls to sleep due to our inattention to God's presence. Each person in our Nativity story was awake to the wonder of God. They were attentive to God within. They noticed the working of the Holy Spirit in each other.

Today's breath prayer was written by Kreg Yingst. I discovered it at the end of a post on the Instagram account @psalmprayers.

Take a moment to relax. Remember that you are God's beloved one. Rest in His care. Breath deeply and hold each breath for a count of 3. Inhale for 3, hold for 3, exhale for 3, remain empty for 3. Repeat. As I read each line, follow the pattern of inhale, hold, exhale, hold.

*Awaken me, Lord
To your light,
Open my eyes
To your presence*

*Awaken me, Lord
To your love,
Open my heart
To your indwelling*

*Awaken me, Lord
To your life,
Open my mind
To your abiding*

*Awaken me, Lord
To your purpose
Open my will
To your guiding
Amen.*

Thursday, The Second Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 1:44-45 (NAB)

[And Elizabeth said:] "For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Being truly seen by another is one of life's greatest joys. Mary and Elizabeth both recognize the underlying work God is doing in each other's lives and comment upon it.

God is the central focus of their conversation. His miracles, ignored or unrecognized by others are seen and acknowledged without a fuss.

As we develop these types of mutual-recognition friendships, we grow in the confidence to be our authentic selves. We gain confidence not only to be seen as we are, but to welcome others to become fully themselves.

We share a special language with our closest friends. A short hand that exists in knowing looks that convey more than a paragraph full of words could ever communicate. When close friends lock eyes, they can see into each other's hearts. Like-hearted friends empathetically connect in the shallows of celebration and the deep end of sorrow.

There is a spark of recognition when Jesus enters the room. We can be on the lookout for the spark of recognition that caused John the Baptist to leap in his mother's belly in our own lives. There are times when someone seems to understand what we are saying without us having to use a million words. We perceive moments when we feel at home in someone else's company. The spark is only the beginning of discovering a true, loyal friend.

Elizabeth affirms and celebrates Mary's decision to become the mother of Jesus. She recognizes Mary as the first person to carry Jesus into a new space.

Just as the Holy Spirit allowed Elizabeth to recognize Mary's internal condition, the Holy Spirit aids us in recognizing Christ within other people.

Who are my friends who have become like family?

Friday, The Second Week of Advent

When the heart is flooded with love there is no room in it for fear, for doubt, for hesitation.

Ann Morrow Lindberg

Gift of the Sea

Friendships formed through kinship or affinity, have the potential to transform our lives. There is so much in our lives that causes us to hold back. We might hesitate to share an opinion that needs refining and so we remain stuck in old ways. We might remain stagnant in our career, worried about whether we are equipped for the next challenge. We might doubt whether a child will ever turn a corner and so we spend a lot of time worrying.

As Lindberg reminds us, we all experience emotions of fear and doubt. Both cause us to hold back in hesitation.

The love of a good and faithful friend can push us beyond the threshold of our fear into the core of our confidence. Together, we venture out to the vast horizon where our gifts can be shared and God's kingdom made known.

Some friendships are born from the bonds of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Imagine what it might have been like if Mary and Elizabeth did not have each other.

With each other, there is no shame or judgment. They can be completely themselves with each other. They did not have to walk on eggshells around each other. They could bolster each other's courage by reminding the other that they could do hard things together.

God loves us so very much that He knew we needed each other. When Elizabeth's heart is flooded with love, she speaks words of affirmation to Mary. Mary's response is an anthem of justice, the great prayer the Magnificat.

Who needs to know how much they mean to you? Who can you spur on beyond their doubt and fear?

If you are feeling doubt or fear, who can you reach out to in order to be filled with love?

Saturday, The Second Week of Advent

"We must be swift to obey the winged impulses of His Love, carrying Him to wherever He longs to be; and those who recognise His presence will be stirred like Elizabeth, with new life. They will know His presence, not by any special beauty or power shown by us, but in the way that the bud knows the presence of the light, by an unfolding in themselves, a putting forth of their own beauty."

Caryll Houselander

The Reed of God

Some questions to ponder:

- 1. What are some of the winged impulses to Love that I recognize?**
- 2. In what ways am I carrying Love where it longs to go?**
- 3. When was the last time that I recognized someone else's beauty unfolding?**

Week Three, Friendship with our *everyday people*

Sunday, The Third Week of Advent

Each year we make our way through the month of December crossing things off our list, one gift purchased after another. Maybe you are smack dab in the middle of scrambling to find the last addresses so you can get those cards in the mail or finding the obscure ingredients for your famous toffee. Or, are cleaning bathrooms to prepare for guests?

It's a miracle it all gets done. So much energy expended, all of it done with the best of intentions. Each of us has a list of things to do before the big day. It's hard to keep it all in perspective.

I'm so glad you are joining me in this Advent Pause.

The Christmas story is familiar yet so far from our everyday modern lives. In some ways, we might imagine Mary and Joseph more like characters in a novel rather than individuals who cried salty tears like you and me. We might imagine Mary and Joseph with a holiness that prevented them from experiencing a full range of human emotions. There are not a lot of emotional details woven into the Nativity Story, but that does not mean we should not try to read between the lines.

A reading from the Gospel of Luke: *and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.* Luke 2:7 (NAB)

Mary and Joseph walk the streets of Bethlehem looking for a place to sleep. We're so familiar with the story that we aren't shocked by the rejection the holy family experiences. It's just another part of their story. They are good people, doing the right thing. And yet, they face rejection at every turn.

It's hard to imagine an author being able to write this redemption story in a convincing way. Who would believe a story in which the God who created the universe chooses not to alter the reservation book at the local inn? A story in which God does not pull strings in order for Jesus, the King of the Universe, to enter the world with any comfort other than love. A God who asks extraordinary things of ordinary people and then seems to ghost them right when they need Him most.

Rejection is painful. I'm sure Mary's feelings twinged just as much as her feet and belly with each inn Joseph tried.

Despite being rejected by others, they were never alone. They cling to each other. Mary and Joseph accept their circumstances without a fuss. They do not seek to change minds by cajoling or posturing.

More importantly, there seems to be little, "I told you so", happening here. Their focus is on the other person and Jesus. Together, they find a place, a simple cave or stable, in which to welcome their child with love. Their little family of two becomes three.

Love arrives despite their feelings of rejection. A love that does not seek to change the other. A love that accepts discomfort. A love that reveals the contours of our heart rather than the balance of our bank account. A love that does not get anxious over rejection whether it is real or perceived.

In our daily lives, we face rejection. We encounter misunderstanding. We are uncomfortable. This happens most often with the people we encounter on an everyday basis. The emotions that accompany rejection can be isolating. They can also drive us to do and say things that don't come from our deepest well of love.

But, they can also drive us closer to our friends who understand us and know our hearts.

Here are some questions I'm asking myself today:

How much of my Christmas preparations are wrapped in love for other people?

How do I respond to rejection or misunderstanding with the people I spend the most time with?

Monday, The Third Week of Advent

"In the degree of the truth of our conception of God, our minds grow broader, deeper, and warmer; our hearts grow wiser and kinder; our humour deeper and more tender; we become more aware of the wonder of life; our senses become more sensitive; our sympathies stronger; our capacity for giving and for receiving greater; our minds are more radiant with a burning light, and the light is the light of Christ."

Caryll Houselander

The Reed of God

Mary and Joseph were caught wandering the streets of Bethlehem without a good plan. Have you ever thought about what it would take for each of them to remain kind to one another on the journey? For each to be the friend the other needed in this situation?

They may have disagreed on the directions. They may not have seen eye to eye on the solution.

And yet. I imagine they found things to laugh about. A way not to take their situation too seriously. Maybe it was the funny way the donkey walked. Or the absurdity of the situation where God could alter the physics of biology but remained unable to find them a place to stay on the most important night of their lives.

I like to think that Joseph was understanding about Mary's tears and comforted her fears. In turn, Mary encouraged Joseph when his weariness set in.

They gave and they received. They relied upon each other. They listened and they laughed.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that idolizes the individual. We strive for self-made perfection. Our path of success starts early with the yin and yang of competition and conformity.

Gold stars, good grades, and brownie points, we compete against each other to see who is the best. Conformity, others claim, is the sole means of obtaining the success we seek. Changing ourselves, our children, and those around us into this model person takes up our time and mental bandwidth.

This individual pursuit of competing against others and conforming our lives to the success model portrayed on social media, deforms our sense of self. In this striving, we no longer give an authentic gift of self, rather something counterfeit created to conform to a false reality.

As we become more fully who God loves us to be that others will be invited to become more fully themselves. In this giving and receiving of our true selves, the Kingdom of God flourishes rather than the flimsy kingdom of our own creation.

What if, instead of making ourselves, we allow God to remain in charge of the changes?

Joseph and Mary knew fully who God was. Their daily lives were a quest to conform their minds and hearts to Him in order for their bodies to do His will.

And what was His will? To give and receive love. Joseph and Mary had a lifetime's worth of daily practices baked into their schedules that allowed them to receive God's love. And in turn bear His love to others.

Question for today:

Do I have a practice that allows God to change my mind, heart?

Tuesday, The Third Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 2:8-14 (NAB)

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

The forgotten, the late nighters, the invisible ones living in the field
Upon them-- glory
The first to be told
Of the news only angels could convey.
Come and see.
The savior is here.
He will live alongside
The rejected and the regal.
Emmanuel. Prince of Peace. Love.
Curious to admire
Arriving empty-handed with news for the pondering heart
Instantly transformed.
Remembered. Restored. Recognized for all their worth.

Wednesday, The Third Week of Advent

In God's infinite wisdom, He created our bodies with internal systems to regulate the functioning of our organs. The desert mothers and fathers developed a practice of prayer that matched phrases with breath allowing the body to return to stillness and peace. What we now call "breath prayer" has been around for centuries.

Let's repeat our breath prayer from the IG account @psalmprayers. As you pray, see what word stands out to you. Carry that word with you to ponder throughout today.

Take a moment to relax.

Remember that you are God's beloved one.

Rest in His care.

Breath deeply and hold each breath for a count of 3. Inhale for 3, hold for 3, exhale for 3, remain empty for 3. Repeat. As I read each line inhale, hold, exhale, hold. Repeat.

Prayer from Psalm Prayer:

Awaken me, Lord

To your light,

Open my eyes

To your presence

Awaken me, Lord

To your love,

Open my heart

To your indwelling

Awaken me, Lord

To your life,

Open my mind

To your abiding

Awaken me, Lord

To your purpose

Open my will

To your guiding

Amen.

Thursday, The Third Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Luke 2:15-20 NRSV

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The exhaustion is what I remember most. A weariness that settled deep in my bones and clouded my mind making it hard to do much of anything. Those first few weeks after having our first child were physically painful, yet emotionally exhilarating. I coasted along on adrenaline and love for a while, priding myself in getting up, getting dressed, and staying on my normal schedule.

Finally, my nightly cat naps were not enough to keep me going. I gave into the advice other seasoned mothers had shared. I needed to sleep when my baby slept.

And so, that was how I found myself, sitting on my sofa in my pajamas in the middle of the day welcoming a visitor. I was frankly too tired to brush my hair. I'm not even sure if my teeth were brushed. She brought dinner and we talked with wonder about how a single 7-pound bundle of joy could disrupt a life so radically.

If I had been thinking clearly, I would have thanked her at the door. I was too tired to worry about how she might be judging me or what she might say to others in our small town about my lack of maternal instinct. We did not know each other that well. Our husbands worked together. We were from different backgrounds, age groups, and parts of the country. Her kindness stands out in my memory. She had a daughter and twin boys in close succession, so she understood. Her wisdom and non judgment were just what I needed that day.

When the shepherds arrived to visit Jesus, Mary may have been tempted to turn them away. Yet, she and Joseph welcomed them in.

How often do we wait until everything is perfect to receive others into our homes or lives? Have you ever welcomed a guest whose kindness you pondered in your own heart?

Friday, The Third Week of Advent

“You wouldn’t think so to look at her, but she is [a kindred spirit]. You don’t find it right out at first [...] but after a while you come to see it. Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It’s splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world.”

L.M. Montgomery Anne of Green Gables

Do you remember how it felt on the first day of school when you were little? Maybe you walked into class greeting a sea of faces that were hard to tell apart. You were in the same room as your best friend and did not know her yet.

Over time you got to know each person's name and lunch box. You knew who would finish their test first and who never turned their homework in on time. You figured out who you could trust with news of your secret crush. True friendships take curiosity, time and effort.

In early childhood we seemed to swim in a sea of Kindred Spirits.

When we think about these precious friendships in our own lives, we forget the time that we invested in the relationship.

With all of the division in the world, it's tempting to retreat into a small circle of people we consider "like-minded folks". It is tempting to settle for adult friends who look, act, and dress like us, echoing our own opinions.

You might imagine a Kindred Spirit adult friend always applauds your opinions and acknowledges your feelings. Is that really true? How would we grow and change and become better humans if we weren't challenged?

The people in the Nativity Story did not look or act alike. They came from different backgrounds and different world views. On the outside, you would be hard pressed to figure out what they had in common.

We know what drew them together: their adoration of Jesus. Each form of adoration was unique to the heart doing the adoring.

In these waning days of Advent ponder who your Kindred Spirits are. Who are the people in your life who also adore Jesus?

Saturday, The Third Week of Advent

Just as we cannot depend upon feelings to know that Christ is in ourselves, we cannot depend upon appearances to know that He is in others.

We do not have to discover in which of several people Christ is to be found: we must look for Him in them all.

Caryll Houselander

The Reed of God

Sometimes friends are different from us in terms of age, clothes, or external appearance. We may not always share the same opinions on politics, careers paths, or investments. And yet, we recognize a likeness we share at our core: our hearts.

While it doesn't feel peaceful to remain in relationship with people with whom you don't see eye to eye. There is a way to remain united, heart to heart. How do we do this? By focusing on what we have in common--a belief that God is at work.

So, it is vital that we continue to pay attention to our own hearts. Despite our feelings, we can daily seek God from our heart. We can allow ourselves to be loved by Him. We can set aside a few minutes to gaze at Jesus in adoration as the Shepherds did. To imagine the chorus of angels singing overhead- there will be peace on earth.

Week Four, Friendship in widening circles

Sunday, The Fourth Week of Advent

Over the past few weeks, we've looked at different aspects of friendship revealed through the Nativity. In the first week, we looked at our primary friendship with God found within. Next, we turned to friendship born from our family of origin. Our circle then widened as we considered our spouses, neighbors and coworkers. This week, we expand into the circle of friendships formed by common goals or affinity.

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-6 (NAB)

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Details about the Magis' trip to visit Jesus are few and far between. Matthew tells us that the Magi set out on their journey after connecting the rising of a star with the birth of a Jewish king.

We don't know the backstory of the Magis' friendship before their road trip. Somehow, they discovered that they shared something in common. They were united in their desire to pay homage to this new king. Their adventurous journey cemented a friendship filled with ups and downs.

In order for their trip to be successful, they each needed to bring something personal to the journey that no one else could contribute. Money could do little to ensure that the men and their caravan reached their intended goal if they did not start from a

place of mutual respect that eventually grew into friendship. Day after day, they showed up for each other. Day after day, their trust in each other grew stronger.

But they were human and their journey took a while.

We can only imagine the temptation of one Magi to roll his eyes over the campfire as another told the same story, again while a third ate noisily, again.

Spending lots of time together, in close quarters, makes it hard to hide the quirky parts of our personalities.

Stuff gets on our nerves and we may rub others nerves the wrong way too. Some days we struggle to overlook the foibles and idiosyncrasies of those who are close to us.

Coming out of a long period of togetherness, it's understandable if you are savoring alone time a little too much.

But the Magi show us the importance of staying true to what brought us together in the first place. They found a way to laugh off the irritations and let go of small grievances. They remained unoffendable. The Magi did not quit midstream on their journey to see Jesus. They worked together to follow that star, despite the cost of their own comfort.

Monday, The Fourth Week of Advent

"A friend ought to be chosen with the utmost care and tested with extreme caution."

Aelred of Rievaulx

Spiritual Friendship

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the Magi went straight to the seat of known power to meet with King Herod. After an arduous journey, they were a mere 5 miles from Jesus' birthplace of Bethlehem. Yet, they lacked detailed directions. So it's understandable that learned men would look for information in a place where other learned men gathered.

It's easy to imagine at least one of the Magi entertaining the idea that friendship with Herod was a good idea. Herod had the right clothes, the right pedigree, and the right

address. Herod was powerful, wealthy, and could arguably throw a good party. As men from another country, forging a relationship with Herod had the potential to increase their own standing at home.

It's human nature to seek a relationship with people who have the power, experience, resources or knowledge we need. It is natural to drift into friendships with people who are in close proximity to us. We might imagine we have as much in common on the inside as we do on the outside. It's not surprising that the Magi would be drawn to the palace as their first stop in the region.

After a long time on the road, maybe one of the Magi was tempted to quit their trip and remain with Herod a little while longer. Maybe one was ready for a little break in the routine of everyday faces.

Thankfully, none of them fell on this stumbling block. The Magi **discerned** that it was time to keep going. The Magi trusted each other. They held each other accountable. They tested their experiences against one another's experiences. They were not lured away from seeking the newborn King by the hope of personal power and prestige.

Importantly, they remained dedicated to their task of following the star.

Discernment is equally important in our friendship journeys. When a relationship struggles or falls apart, we wonder what we could or should have done differently. We often blame ourselves for lacking key qualities that the other person needed us to have. On our journey from acquaintance to friend, there's a chance we placed trust in a person who had not earned it or did not deserve it.

Our hearts and our time are precious. Our energy stores are limited. We only have so many hours in a day. So, it's a good idea to follow St. Aelred's advice and choose our friends with care and test them with caution. The investment of time in discerning our friendships pays lifelong dividends.

Not all of our relationships can be intimate. Many should remain at arm's length. We live with the hope that by looking for qualities other than power and prestige, we will find friendships with kindred spirits.

By examining our motivations and discerning our desires related to friendship it becomes easier to recognize and avoid the Herods in our own life.

Tuesday, The Fourth Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:7-8 (NAB)

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

The Magi were honest with Herod expecting his honesty in return. Thankfully, their friendship developed and was tested by their journey. Remaining faithful to each other and their shared mission of seeking Christ together allowed them to remain focused on their ultimate destination rather than trying to curry favor with the king.

The eye-catching twinkle in the sky
Adventurous spirit responds
Curiosity echoes in three minds
What shall we find?
Are the words passed through generations true?
The journey is long, some want to turn back.
Never sleeping in the same place twice.
Unpredictable weather.
Hunger and thirst.
Friends becoming brothers.
The star leading the way.
Bets placed about what will be found:
A throne
Alliances
Favor with God.
The journey is long, some want to turn back.
Encouraging the discouraged
Carrying the weak
Bringing our gifts
We press on following the star.
The eye-catching twinkle in the sky
Adventurous spirits still respond
Curiosity unfolds in many minds
What shall we find?

Wednesday, The Fourth Week of Advent

In God's infinite wisdom, He created our bodies with internal systems to regulate the functioning of our organs. The desert mothers and fathers developed a practice of prayer that matched phrases with breath allowing the body to return to stillness and peace. What we now call "breath prayer" has been around for centuries.

Daily life takes a toll on our bodies and our minds. Incorporating breath prayer into your day is one way to return your attention to God while also inviting stillness to settle over you. Using the words of Scripture, you can reconnect with God. In this breath prayer, we remember that we too are vessels created by God to carry Christ's love into the world. As you pray, remember that you are His Divine masterpiece.

Take a moment to relax.

Remember that you are God's beloved one.

Rest in His care.

Breath deeply and hold each breath for a count of 3. Inhale for 3, hold for 3, exhale for 3, remain empty for 3. Repeat.

As you inhale, pray:

I will walk

Hold this breath, pray:

The rocky path

As you exhale, pray:

With Your Love

Hold this emptiness

As my guide

Thursday, The Fourth Week of Advent

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:9-12 (NAB)

After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

The Magi traveled with a set of expectations about what they would find. They brought expensive gifts to honor someone whose birth altered the stellar system.

And yet.

The endpoint of their arduous journey was an infant in a manger. A baby born on the margins. Before entering the space containing the manger, the Magi must have been curious. They had experienced the luxury of the Jerusalem palace. The surface appearance of Jesus' outdoor accommodations did not reveal the true gift this baby was born to give.

Did these men who had traveled so far confer with one another before entering? Clearly this family had nothing to give them in exchange for their gifts. This was not to be a reciprocal exchange.

And yet.

The Magi did not let their own external trappings or experience of luxury turn them away from meeting Jesus. These highly educated men remained united in their mission, opening their treasure chest to Him.

How often are we tempted to keep the treasure chest of our authentic selves closed to others who seem like they might be an unlikely fit for our friendship? We place our trust in people who are not always worthy of our trust. Relationships with people based upon our quest for more power, prestige, or popularity usually remain at an arm's length distance. There are times when we are fooled into believing that power is the proper foundation of friendship rather than giving of self. In my experience, people in power do not have my best interest at heart.

Friday, The Fourth Week of Advent

"Friendship is not tribute, but a thing full of beauty, full of grace. It is a virtue, not a trade, because it is bought with love, not money, because it is acquired by competition in generosity, not by a haggling over its prices.

St. Ambrose

Imagine someone offering you an 18-wheeler full of whatever it is that you want: power, youth, beauty, money, prestige, success... whatever one thing you think will bring you happiness.

They meet you in a parking lot, ready to unload the contents. Then, they ask for something in return. They want you to hand over your closest friendship.

They want you to give away the one relationship that you have fought hardest to keep through years of forgiveness, laughter, tears, and memories.

Would you do it? I didn't think so. Because we each know, deep down, that our friendships, especially our Christ-Centered ones, are more precious than gold.

Today, is there one thing you can do to let this friend know you are praying for them?

Saturday, the Fourth Week of Advent

Christmas Eve

In the still of the night or was it the quiet of dawn's breaking light-- a baby was born. The stars danced above while the earth rang out an imperceptible chorus of "Glory to God in the Highest". Magi traveled from far away. Shepherds gazed. A mother and father marveled at what God had brought together. People. Every last one of them changed forever by love.

As Advent draws to a close and Christmas arrives with one more turn of a calendar page, may you continue to be amazed by the gift of friendship. May you find Christ in each person you encounter along your way. And may the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding remain with you and all whom you love. In the name of the Father. And the Son. And the Holy Spirit. Amen.

BONUS

Journal Prompts

1. Who has been your friend the longest? How did you meet each other?

Describe one of your favorite experiences with this friend.

2. What does it feel like to extend a welcome to others?

3. What does it feel like to discover that you and a friend don't agree on important issues?

4. What qualities do you look for in a friend?

5. Who is a friend you've made recently? Describe how you met?

6. What struggles do you find in making new friends?

7. What do you love best about your friendships?

8. What would you change about your friendships if it was easy?

9. What would change if, even though it was hard work, would allow you to develop deep, lasting friendships?

10. What was the outcome of the last conversation you had with a friend where you revealed something painful/hard/honest? What did it feel like to be accepted?

11. What do you enjoy doing with your friends? When was the last time you did this?

12. How are you seeking to bring love to others while expecting nothing in return?

13. Could it be that busyness makes it harder to recognize God growing in me?

14. Respond to this quote: "We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up for the lack in another."

Thomas Merton