



## Contemplative Christmas

Greg Hildenbrand

# Contemplative Christmas:

*Daily Meditations from Thanksgiving  
through Epiphany*

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## Introduction

The traditional *season* of Christmas begins four weeks before Christmas with the season of Advent. Before Advent, however, and inseparably tied to the spirit of the season is Thanksgiving. I begin these meditations with Thanksgiving for that reason.

The twelve days following Christmas Day are known as the Twelve Days of Christmas, which end with Epiphany or the revelation of the divine nature of the Christ child. Because Epiphany is an important part of understanding the Christmas story, I continue these meditation through the twelve days of Christmas and conclude them on Epiphany.

Each meditation contains a reflection and a closing meditation. The closing meditation provides suggestions for how to enter more deeply into the meditation and always concludes with an invitation to journal one's thoughts, insights, and feelings. It is my hope that this will better prepare the reader to reflect upon and *experience* the spirit of the lesson instead of simply reading about it. Only in this way will the seasons of Christmas transform us.

### *Challenges in this Text*

Organizing the readings for this meditation series is challenging for a couple of reasons. First, unlike Christmas and Epiphany, the actual date of Thanksgiving is different each year. That means the beginning of Advent changes each year, as do the number of days in the fourth week of Advent. As such, you may find yourself in Advent in the book a few days before or after Advent is occurring in the church year. Likewise, you may find more daily meditations in the fourth week of Advent than occur in a given church year, so flexibility will be necessary.

I pray you will find these readings and exercises transformational, as these seasons of Christmas are intended to be!

Greg Hildenbrand  
February 2026



## *Thanksgiving Day*

### **Reading:**

*“Gratitude can transform any situation. It alters your vibration, moving you from negative energy to positive. It’s the quickest, easiest, most powerful way to effect change in your life...” Oprah Winfrey<sup>1</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The focus of Thanksgiving is (supposed to be) *Gratitude*. Developing a sense of gratitude is a key to experiencing God’s presence in all situations. When we are grateful, our hearts and minds are better able to notice the abundance of reasons to be thankful. Sincere gratitude perpetuates itself. We all know people who seem always to find something to criticize or complain about. They tend to judge everything by pointing out what is missing or wrong instead of what is truly present. Those who develop an attitude of gratitude, on the other hand, see what is right and good and possible. My Grandma Hildenbrand always treated me as the person she believed I could become, which was usually a far cry from the person I was at the time. Decades after her passing, her optimistic vision continues to encourage and inspire me.

A lot of being grateful has to do with first impressions. If we first look favorably on something or someone, we are much more likely to notice additional goodness. The opposite is true if our first impression is negative. One way to become a more grateful person is to be intentional about finding something positive about a person or situation right away. Constructive criticism, if necessary and appropriate, can wait.

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<sup>1</sup> Oprah Winfrey, *What I Know For Sure*, 2024.

**Closing Meditation:**

Journal the name of someone, past or present, for whom you are thankful and your reasons why.

In your mind or heart, silently hold the image of that person and how they make or made you feel.

Offer a spoken or silent prayer of thanksgiving and gratitude for this influential soul.

## *Second Day of Thanksgiving*

### **Reading:**

*“The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

There is a direct relationship between what we give and what we receive. Farmers and gardeners know this well. If they do not plant in the spring, there will be no harvest in the fall. The lessons of sowing and reaping are less obvious today since few of us grow our own food. But not so many generations ago, inadequate attention to spring planting would result in an uncomfortably lean winter. Demonstrations of sowing and reaping are all around us as the decisions of the past manifest their consequences today. We have sayings that speak these truths: *“The chickens come home to roost.”* *“We get what we deserve.”* *“There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”* But the time and events that intervene between cause and effect make the direct connection of past to present easily overlooked.

Paul addresses the concept of sowing and reaping in today’s reading, noting that we must sow in abundance to reap in abundance. And those who receive in abundance must also share abundantly, as this is critical part of sowing for our future. We sow many different types of seeds during our lives: seeds of kindness, hard work, of love and generosity. We also, however, sow seeds of impatience, greed, and other less-than-desirable traits, all of which return to us in one way or another. So, if in this season of Thanksgiving, we do not receive as abundantly as we had hoped – whether we are seeking kindness, love, or material blessings – we should carefully consider the seeds we sow today.

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

**Closing Meditation:**

Close this time with a few minutes of silent reflection on the nature of the seeds you sow. In what ways might I be reaping the harvest of seeds I sowed in the past?

Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

## Third Day of Thanksgiving

### Reading:

*“Are not five sparrows sold for one penny? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight.”*

### Reflection:

A helpful exercise for growing our gratitude is to stop overlooking the ordinary in search of the extraordinary so we can find the extraordinary in the ordinary. The Christmas stories in the Bible and stories of Thanksgivings past may sound miraculous today because they are set in unfamiliar times and places. Most stories written centuries ago present their truths allegorically instead of literally or as historical fact. Many of the details in the miraculous events as they are told and understood today have been embellished and romanticized to hide their ordinariness. The daily realities of the ill-prepared pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock would not have been easy or pleasant. In the traditional Christmas narratives, Jesus is portrayed as an infant born under difficult circumstances to illustrate how miraculous events arise from otherwise mundane experiences. Welcome to life on earth!

It is not that miracles do not happen. It is that we ignore countless, everyday miracles in our search for something extraordinary. Our breath, for example. Or our ability to pick up a sheet of paper from the desk; our beating heart; the amazing variety of birds at the bird feeder are all miracles we often take for granted because they are so commonplace. Miracle work is seldom glamorous: it does not pay well, if at all, and often goes unappreciated and unacknowledged.

Jesus pointed out the problem of having eyes but not seeing. He was not referring to physical blindness but to our unwillingness to look beneath the surface of the ordinary. When we learn to *see* as Jesus saw, we realize we are constantly bombarded by miracles – and we are thankful.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:6

**Closing Meditation:**

Name three blessings for which you are thankful. Reflect on these in silent meditation.

Journal your thoughts and feelings.

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 1*

**Reading:**

“...*suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...*”<sup>4</sup>

**Reflection:**

*Hope*, the first theme of Advent, is not the same as *wishing*. We may *wish* for good weather on Saturday, something we have no control over, when what we *hope* for is an enjoyable, enriching experience on Saturday regardless of the weather. Hope opens a path for something enjoyable independent of the circumstances we may think are required. Hope is a deeper, more inclusive orientation that creates space for surprises and unexpected blessings. Hope trusts that all things will work together for good.

And this is our hope: that we would *know* or perhaps *remember* ourselves as the *Beloved of God*. It is our birthright that we are precious to God regardless of what we have done or how *unholy* we think we have behaved. The pure, divine seed at the heart of our soul cannot be defiled by anything that happens to or is done by us. We are not defined by the events of our lives, nor by what others think of us; we are defined by the image in whom we were created.

The hope of Christmas is that we will *consciously* birth the Christ-child within, which means awakening to the union of spirit and body that is us. This is the subtle gift of Christmas. We cannot earn it. We cannot force it. We can only remain awake for it so we will consciously receive and nurture it as it emerges. For this we wait. For this we prepare. For this we hope. Once we know we *are already* beloved children of God, we begin the life-long journey of living into that divine heritage.

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:3-5

**Closing Meditation:**

Journal the three things you most hope for this season and why they are important to you.

Close with a short prayer of gratitude.

**Optional Music Video:** *A Sign of Hope*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRaMhl6YX1I>)

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 2*

**Reading:**

*“A liminal space is the time between the “what was” and the “next.” It is a place of transition, a season of waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us.”<sup>5</sup>*

**Reflection:**

A *limen* is a threshold – something that separates *here* from *there*. As we approach times of change, we enter *liminal space*, sometimes willingly, other times kicking and screaming. Liminal space may come upon us in the form of a hopeful opportunity that we can accept or refuse. Liminal space, however, is not usually well-defined in terms of its effect on our life, and once we cross the threshold, the new path seldom allows a return to the way things were.

Entering Advent intentionally is to enter liminal space as a conscious choice. If we choose not to enter the Advent season in an intentional way, Christmas will likely continue as it always has – lots of excitement, lots of stress, lots of expense – and once over, life will mostly return to the way it was before. And for many, that is not necessarily a bad thing. When the status quo is good, most people are disinclined to risk upsetting it. Unfortunately, the status quo is never transformational, and we cannot hope for a deeper experience of Christmas without risking uncomfortable circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Jon DeWaal and Shonnie Scott, “What Is a Liminal Space?” *Liminal Space*, <http://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space/>. Reprinted in *Crisis Contemplation*, Barbara A Holmes, CAC Publishing, 2021, p. 128.

### Contemplative Christmas

When John the Baptist prepared folks for the coming of Jesus, he told them to *Repent*, which means to turn around or to change – to *transform*. Repentance is a necessary prerequisite to following the life and teachings of Jesus. Unless we consciously change something in ourselves, unless we make room for something new, we cannot hope to be drawn closer to the Christ in this season or ever. It is not that the gift is withheld but that we will remain incapable of receiving it.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

Close with a few minutes of silent meditation. Imagine a liminal time in your life and what changed because of it. Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 3*

#### **Reading:**

*...it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep...the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*<sup>6</sup>

#### **Reflection:**

The birth of the Christ-child within is a much deeper mystery than what is honored or recognized in most of our Christmas preparations and celebrations. The Christ-child is not simply a baby born 2000 years ago to Jewish peasants in the Middle East. The transforming mystery of the Christ-child is contained in the name *Emmanuel*, which means *God is with us*.

The birth of the Christ-child is a personal awakening to a reality already alive within us – the Spirit of God. It occurs outside of our familiar, three-dimensional experience of space and time, however. What we *hope* for is the inner transformation this awakening brings, which allows for the emergence of a holier, more complete version of ourselves – the eternal and undefiled part of us known by and connected to God. The Christ-child is born as we consciously reunite our spiritual nature with our physical being, as Jesus modeled during his life on earth. The birth of the Christ-child within is reawakening to who we truly are – the image of God from which we were created. It is not so much the birth of something new as much as the emergence of a latent potential lying dormant within.

What we hope for is the unshakable certainty that we come from and remain connected to God – as we always have been and always will be. *Emmanuel*.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 13:11-12

**Closing Meditation:**

Consider a few changes to your daily routine that might hasten the emergence of the Christ-child.

Sit quietly as you journal your thoughts.

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 4*

#### **Reading:**

*“...now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”<sup>7</sup>*

#### **Reflection:**

Two traditional attributes of Advent are *waiting* and *hoping*. We wait *expectantly* for something we cannot see or explain. That sort of waiting requires patience and persistence. Why would anyone wait for anything they cannot see or understand? Why would we hope for anything that holds no promise of material gain or profit? Perhaps that is why we so easily get wrapped up (pun intended) in the tangible aspects of what Christmas has become – parties, presents, and decorations. Our physical senses can at least engage with those. We can show them off to friends and family.

As the apostle Paul implies in his letter to the Romans, however, there is no hope in tangibility. We do not hope for what we already have or know. Hope stretches us beyond what is known and comfortable to that which is new, different, and transformative. It invites us to enter and explore the mysteries of life, knowing we will never fully comprehend them. And it invites that exploration with an expectation that what we hope for will be given, although not likely in ways we can imagine.

The spiritual mysteries of and deep questions surrounding Christmas abound with possibilities for expectant hope.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

If there were a single transformative insight you could receive this Christmas, what would it be?

Silently hold your desire for that insight. Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:24-25



## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 5*

**Reading:**

*“Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not; remember that what you now have was once among the things you only hoped for.”<sup>8</sup>*

**Reflection:**

The theme of *Hope* is a subtle, but profound illustration of the Advent season of waiting. Indeed, as we hope for something we must wait for it to manifest. After something we have hoped for arrives, we no longer need to hope or wait for it.

In general, most of us do not wait well. We are used to being able to cross the country in a few hours or to access centuries of information with a few clicks on a keyboard. We expect and demand efficiency and convenience, especially when there is already more to be done than hours in the day. For many of us, the thought of Christmas approaching in any sort of transformative way is an enormous threat to our sense of control. On top of everything else we are not getting done, we add spiritual growth to the shopping, decorating, and other energy-depleting activities that mark what the Christmas season has become.

And that is one reason Advent can be a difficult, counter-cultural, and easily-ignored season. To enter Advent with the intention of preparing for an inner transformation requires time and effort we often feel we do not have, especially for an intangible reward that is poorly defined or understood. Advent invites us to create open space in a crowded universe.

Indeed, it is the difficulties of the journey that open the pathways to new insights into this season. They allow spiritual maturation to occur – not as a one-time event but as an on-going process.

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<sup>8</sup> [Epicurus - Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you... \(brainyquote.com\)](https://brainyquote.com/quote/10000000.html), accessed September 27, 2024.

**Closing Meditation:**

Think about something you once hoped for that is now a reality for you. In what ways does the current reality differ from the expectant hopes of the past?

Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 6*

#### **Reading:**

*“The angel said to her, ‘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 holy; he will be called Son of God.’”<sup>9</sup>*

#### **Meditation:**

It is written, and I agree, that nothing is impossible with God.<sup>10</sup> But my experience tells me that the vast majority of God’s work is incognito, is done by human hands, and appears mundane and commonplace because it happens all around us all of the time. Our wild imaginations lead us to search for God in faraway places and extraordinary circumstances until God laughs, taps us on the shoulder, wakes us up from our earthly slumber and says, *“Surprise! Here I am!”*

*Everything* carries God’s fingerprint hidden in plain sight. Unfathomable, life-giving, life-sustaining gifts of grace are found everywhere by those who take a moment to identify, treasure, and ponder them. It is not that God’s normal work through us is not miraculous or awe-inspiring, but that we so take it for granted that we miss the extraordinary in everything we consider ordinary. And when we do not experience what we believe qualifies as a miracle we feel disappointed and cheated.

Yet, here is the truth: The miracle is here, where it has always been, and where it always will be – beside, within, and around you, me, and all created beings. Emmanuel, *God with us*, is a truly unfathomable miracle, not just during the Christmas season but all year long.

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:35

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:37

**Closing Meditation:**

Jesus said that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.<sup>11</sup> Reflect on what your treasure says about where your heart is. Where might you look more closely to find God's presence in your life? Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:21

## *Season of Advent*

### *Hope, Day 7*

**Reading:**

*“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation...so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the hope to which he has called you...”<sup>12</sup>*

**Reflection:**

Entering Advent with the intention of allowing it to transform us necessarily requires that we put ourselves in situations conducive to consciously connecting to where God abides within us. Such situations may remove us from our comfort zone, but they should also allow the love of God within us to shine through to others. We do this by slowing down, not speeding up; by seeking quiet spaces for study and reflection, not by being consumed by the chaos the secular season offers; by learning what *God with us* means and feels like, not by sitting on Santa’s lap.

It is through these and other contemplative and counter-cultural orientations that we find ourselves in situations most conducive to manifesting our deepest and most transformative hopes for Advent and Christmas.

**Closing Meditation:**

Identify one or two intentions for yourself for the remaining days of Advent.

Close with a few minutes of silent meditation.

Journal the thoughts or feelings that arise.

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<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 1:17-18



## Season of Advent: Peace, Day 1

### Reading:

*“For a child has been born for us...and he is named...Prince of Peace”<sup>13</sup>*

### Reflection:

*Peace*, the second theme of Advent, springs from the *Hope* we find as we experience Emmanuel – *God with us*. Peace comes as we learn to trust that God’s presence within and around us is real, even though it seldom manifests in the way or on the timeline we may think it should. That trust frees us from anxiety so we can experience an internal peace that, in the words of the apostle Paul, passes all understanding. We no longer feel we must control or even understand the events of our lives, as if we ever controlled or understood them anyway. As we learn to face life’s challenges without fear, trusting God’s timing and presence, a sense of peaceful equanimity emerges.

More than that, our sense of peace naturally spreads to those around us with little or no effort on our part. Peaceful beings transmit peace. The imagery of the *Prince of Peace* does not necessarily refer to the seemingly impossible dream of peace on earth. One can argue that the primary manifestation of the *Prince of Peace*, another name for Emmanuel, is the sense of internal peace manifested in us, which we then project into the world.

The earthly royal designations of *prince* or *princess* are special and rare circumstances of one’s earthly, birth lineage. The birth of the Christ-child in our hearts bestows a royal designation to anyone willing to receive it by being consciously *reborn* into the family of God.

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<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 9:6

**Closing Meditation:**

Recall a time when you felt most at peace. What differentiated that experience from less peaceful times in your life? How can that sense of peace be recreated for you?

Silently reflect on internal peace. Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

**Optional Video Meditation:** *Peace*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-0U1uxlm0k>)

## *Season of Advent: Peace, Day 2*

### **Reading:**

*“He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of the two, thus making peace.”<sup>14</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The more than 600 laws set out in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) to guide Jewish behavior became a source of serious contention as Jesus’ disciples, all of whom were Jews, began spreading his message to the Gentiles, or non-Jews. In those early days, what was to become Christianity was largely treated as an annoying step-child of Judaism, and devout Jews, including some of the disciples, were insistent that everyone using their synagogues comply with their laws. One of the more contentious issues was the requirement for every male to be circumcised. Resistance to this practice by non-Jews eventually led the leadership in Jerusalem to relent on all of the laws laid out in the Torah, except for a few dietary restrictions. They recognized that circumcision and certain other Jewish practices were unnecessary inhibitors to encouraging folks to follow the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus, of course, never intended to start a new religion. He was a faithful Jew to the end. Rather, he taught a way of life that could be lived within *any* religion, including for those with no religion. He sought an end to the contentious debates over the cultural practices of various belief systems, encouraging folks to make peace with each other and unite under their common search for God instead of dividing over the various practices used to conduct that search.

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<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 2:15

**Closing Meditation:**

There are still Jewish practices adopted by traditional Christianity that may stand as road-blocks for some seekers on a spiritual journey. Reflect on practices or beliefs you feel slow or inhibit your ability to trust the life and teachings of Jesus as a guide for your life.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Peace, Day 3*

### **Reading:**

*“Christmas comes with many assumptions – some helpful, some not so much. Spirituality also comes with many assumptions, and the ones that fail us are the ones we make about what it’s supposed to look like, who is worthy for it to happen to, and what kind of outcome it’s supposed to have for us.”<sup>15</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

If we believe that Jesus came to free us from our sin, and as we understand that sin is what separates us from God and others, then it follows that Jesus came to free us from our sense of separation, our sense of aloneness. Jesus came to unite us and make us One. God is not separate from us in spite of the fact that we cannot see or know God in the same ways we see and know others. We are not God, but we are not other than God either.

Jesus came to reveal the bridge between heaven and earth, the spiritual and physical realms. That bridge is a way of life and a conscious state of being, not a physical structure. His life demonstrated that our sense of separation from the heavenly, spiritual realm is an illusion. That sense of separateness is *our* creation, not God’s. Following the life and teachings of Jesus helps us become consciously aware of our inherent union with God and others. Whenever we see, respect, and acknowledge another, God affirms them *through* us. And by the example of his life Jesus says, *“This is what a loving, connected life looks like. Follow me.”*

Bringing peace to our part of the world requires that we affirm and honor our Oneness with everything in creation. What threatens one threatens all; what benefits one benefits all.

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<sup>15</sup> Scott Erickson, *Honest Advent*, Zondervan Books, 2020, pp. 90-91.

**Closing Meditation:**

Identify a few assumptions or expectations you have about Christmas that destroy your sense of peace.

Journal your thoughts and feelings about them.

## *Season of Advent: Peace, Day 4*

### **Reading:**

*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>16</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

In war, *peace* comes when one side surrenders to the other. In business, *peace* may come through consensus where competing sides find a resolution that includes some elements of importance for all parties. In families, *peace* too often only comes through submission to the one in power, usually the father-figure. Each of these earthly expressions of peace require many souls to give up something of importance to them. And those types of peace can only be maintained by violence, either real or threatened. The peace achieved in this way is not peace at all because everyone is forever seeking opportunities to regain what they’ve lost. They have only stopped fighting as they await an opportunity to escape the oppression of or to usurp the one in power

A true, lasting peace is so much more than simply the cessation of overt violence. It is only attainable when everyone involved is content with the current state of affairs. It requires just, fair, sustainable, and non-violent resolutions to conflict.

The peace modeled by the life and teachings of Jesus is based on achieving justice, fairness, and sustainability for all, especially for and inclusive of those on the margins of society.

### **Closing Meditation:**

Silently reflect on Jesus’ words, *“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* What could he possibly be saying to us?  
Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 10:34



## Season of Advent: Peace, Day 5

### Reading:

*“The day the power of love overrules the love of power, the world will know peace.”<sup>17</sup>*

### Reflection:

In its common usage, *peace* is not a singular concept but has many applications, several of which are relevant in preparing for the birth of the Christ-child. One common understanding of peace is world peace. We recall the story of the British and German soldiers on a Christmas morning during World War I, taking time out from battle to sing Christmas Carols together and share rations. Unfortunately, they resumed shooting at each other the next day. Lasting world peace seems like a distant dream.

Closer to home for many is peace in our families. The Christmas season is fraught with family gatherings, some of which linger well beyond everyone’s comfort level. Particularly for families who do not gather often where memories of how annoying certain relatives are to us may fade – until they walk through the door. Sometimes, we attempt to make amends and keep peace in the family – other times, not so much.

For me, the most challenging application of peace – and arguably the most important – is inner peace. Making time to center myself, maintaining balance through a hectic time of the year, is a constant challenge. It is, however, vital to keeping one’s focus on the transformative invitations of the season.

Peace in our families and peace in our world begin with individual, inner peace.

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<sup>17</sup> Quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi

**Closing Meditation:**

Begin this meditation with four deep, slow breaths, followed by this prayer:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace this day. Amen.*

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## Season of Advent: Peace, Day 6

### Reading:

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”<sup>18</sup>*

### Reflection:

How has Christmas, the celebration, strayed so far from its origins? Did not the angels sing of “Peace on Earth” in Bethlehem 2000 years ago? Was that peace intended to apply to the inner city? The homeless? The oppressed? The Middle East? To the stomach of a starving child? Perhaps it is helpful to consider where peace is not. Wherever violence, chronic need, fear, oppression, or marginalization exist, there can be no peace. The least peaceful times in my life have been characterized by fear, uncertainty, anger, and loss of control – times when it is difficult to maintain enough focus for even the simplest of prayers. In the disorganized havoc of such times God may be present but seems far away at best. The manger scene we picture for Jesus’ birth could not have been the peaceful scene we now romanticize it to be. We believe God was there, however, as God is here today.

We have the free will to turn to, acknowledge, and respond to God’s presence – or not. For me, I must quiet my mind to experience God, but any sense of fear, uncertainty, or need overrides my sense of inner peace. When I am centered enough to experience the presence of God, there is no fear or uncertainty or need – there is only God and me. God *with* me. *Emmanuel*.

How I choose to transmit my personal experience of peace to others is up to me. It necessarily, however, must be directed outward in action of some sort. Unless we find ways to translate our peace into helping mitigate the desperate needs of our brothers and sisters, even in small ways, our inner peace will be short-lived.

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<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:14

**Closing Meditation:**

Consider one or two ways you could participate, in large or small ways, in easing the peace-destroying needs of others this season. What would that require of you?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## Season of Advent: Peace, Day 7

### Reading:

*"Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding."*<sup>19</sup>

### Reflection:

For lasting peace to prevail between two people or nations, there must first exist a foundation of mutual respect and trust, some degree of understanding of the other, and an acknowledgement that all points of view have value. I do *not* have to agree with someone to co-exist peacefully with them. I do not even have to *like* them. I do, however, have to accept and respect their right to believe as they do. What we most fear is revealed in what we cannot discuss civilly. Peace cannot be present when one or more sides become defensive, which occurs when we feel threatened. As long as another person's point of view on a particular topic threatens me, we will be unable to have a peaceful or productive discussion on the topic. The source of my fear needs to be addressed first. When defensiveness enters a conversation, minds slam shut. When minds slam shut, there can be no *dialogue*, because productive dialogue requires giving *and* receiving, but closed minds cannot receive.

An open mind is willing to hear and consider alternate points of view without feeling its own beliefs or interests are being threatened. Just because we seek to understand another does not require us to believe as they do, only that we accept them as they believe. Open minds create opportunities to uncover *higher truths* which do not threaten individual beliefs but include and transcend them. These higher truths, once reached, do not threaten either party but respect what is important to all sides. Striving for higher truths allows for civil interaction between people and countries. Only by working to find higher truths will we live in a more peaceful world.

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<sup>19</sup> Quote attributed to Albert Einstein

**Closing Meditation:**

Which of my relationships would most benefit from finding a higher truth?

How can I begin that process today?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 1*

### **Reading:**

*“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”<sup>20</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

*Joy*, the third theme of Advent, contrasts with *happiness*, which is dependent on circumstances over which we have little control. Joy is a deeply-engrained sense of well-being, gratitude, and worthiness that exists apart from circumstances. Many marriage ceremonies include a vow to remain faithful *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part*. Joy, like a good marriage, does not falter in difficult times. Author James Finley says that God is a God who protects us from nothing yet sustains us in all things. The question is *not* whether we will be happy with every situation. The question is whether we will remain faithful through difficult situations. *Joy* is only possible by knowing and trusting that the worst thing is never the only or the last thing.

Joy often springs from a deep faith that God is always with and for us. *Joy* blossoms as we accept that life will forever be a mix of desirable *and* undesirable experiences. The apostle Paul’s assurance that “...*all things work together for good...*” gives reason for us to be joyful, regardless of our circumstances. We know and have experienced that God specializes in weaving beautiful tapestries from ugly threads.

Joy finds wonder in all aspects of life, even and especially when life is difficult. Joyful people have less need to try to control their environment or others because they trust that *every* circumstance is one piece of a larger puzzle made more beautiful and meaningful by the parts most difficult to abide.

The *Joy* of Advent is an invitation to *Rejoice* – regardless of our circumstances.

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<sup>20</sup> Romans 8:28

**Closing Meditation:**

Quietly reflect on a personal experience that was unpleasant but that led to a positive change.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 2*

### **Reading:**

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”<sup>21</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

When Mary responded to the angel Gabriel’s message that she was pregnant with the son of God, she said, “*My soul magnifies the Lord...*” which is such a beautiful, interesting, and profound response. While I do not know if there were magnifying glasses in Mary’s day, the concept of *magnification* was certainly known. When I read this passage I picture my soul as an inner magnifying glass that multiplies the energy of the Spirit, focusing it on whatever is before me. It makes the impact of my life, on myself and others, larger. It helps illuminate aspects of circumstances that may otherwise seem invisible or unexceptional to me. Our souls focus the power of God through us and out into our world. But not without our permission and active participation.

Mary’s *yes* to God’s plan set in motion a series of events that changed the world, but not without significant cost to her or what might otherwise have been a long and happily contented life in Nazareth. Certainly she would have been less likely to find herself weeping at the feet of her first-born child as he was being crucified.

Our *yes* to God, in whatever manner we hear or respond to the request, can similarly change the course of our lives and more. We may be ripped from our comfort zone on a regular basis and stretched beyond what we thought were our limits for endurance. But when we believe our sacrificial actions are helping to manifest a future that would not otherwise have been possible, we find contentment and joy in being a part of the divine plan. As with Mary, our souls also magnify the Lord.

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<sup>21</sup> Luke 1:47-48a

**Closing Meditation:**

In silent reflection, ponder what changes God may be asking of you. What can you sacrifice? What might be gained? Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

**Optional Music Video:** *The Magnificat*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v80GSQJMKGo>)

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 3*

### **Reading:**

*“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for you see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...’”<sup>22</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

When my children were born, as when Jesus was born, angels sang and rejoiced. Not the types of angels that human imaginations have misleadingly inserted into the Christmas story, but *real*, human angels. The Bible does *not* portray angels as winged creatures singing and playing harps on clouds as we have come to imagine. They are messengers and signs of God’s love of, concern for, and presence with us. Angels most often appear in the Bible as disembodied voices or images in dreams. On earth, at least in my experience, angels appear as people. The angelic praises for the births of my children came from grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends – many living and countless others sending love from the other side. It was a beautiful chorus, but it was not unique to us. Every birth should bring such angelic praises and many do, although I know that is not always the case.

Our children, too, were visited by shepherds – ordinary, unfamous, hardworking people often overlooked in their daily lives – faithful folks we know as acquaintances, co-workers, and members of our church family. And our children were visited by wise people bearing gifts – elders and mentors who had already walked the challenging journey of parenting, offering their gifts of knowledge, experience, and assurance that they would stand beside us through our child-rearing experience. And I believe our children have blessed and continue to bless each of these angels, shepherds, and wise people in return – exactly as they should. New birth truly brings joy to the world!

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<sup>22</sup> Luke 2:10

**Closing Meditation:**

Where do you find parallels in your life to the Christmas story? How can it come alive for you personally this season? Ponder these questions during a time of quiet reflection.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 4*

### **Reading:**

*“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified”<sup>23</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

Proverbs 9:10a reads, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”* In the Hebrew language at the time, the word translated as *fear* can also be translated as *awe*. When the angel of God greeted the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth, the Bible says they were *terrified*. I suspect what they felt was a mixture of terror, fear, and awe. Indeed, these emotional reactions are closely related and, according to Proverbs, are the beginning of wisdom. In order to gain in wisdom, we must open our hearts and minds to new ideas, understandings, and experiences, some of which will make us uncomfortable. Otherwise, we simply close ourselves off to whatever does not affirm what we think we already know.

When we cannot find *wonder*, when we are not *awed* by the world around us, whenever we see nothing so grand that we would bow before it in amazement, we probably are not paying attention. We need to be startled out of our complacency, at least occasionally, or we will stagnate. Whether we believe the stories of Jesus’ birth to be literal, historical fact or allegorical tales we should at least understand their purpose is to expand our awareness of what is possible. That is the only way to gain wisdom. Frightening? Terrifying? Awe-inspiring? Sometimes, yes.

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<sup>23</sup> Luke 2:8-9

**Closing Meditation:**

How might your current understanding of the Christmas story inhibit your ability to experience it in new, growth-inducing ways? How can it come more fully alive for you personally this season? Ponder these questions during a time of quiet reflection.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 5*

### **Reading:**

*“He puzzled and puzzled till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before. Maybe Christmas, he thought...doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps...means a little bit more. And what happened then? Well, in Whoville they say...that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day. And then – the true meaning of Christmas came through, and the Grinch found the strength of ten Grinches, plus two!”<sup>24</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The fictional Grinch was an outsider looking in. He lived in a hell of his own making and projected his misery onto those around him. He assumed the season of Christmas and the joy it seemed to bring to the inhabitants of Whoville was a ridiculous and materialistic ruse. He was certain if he stole the presents and the decorations and the food the joy of the season would quickly dissipate, and everyone in Whoville would be left as miserable and empty as the Grinch. But that’s not what happened. Sans presents, decorations, and food, the people of Whoville were still joyous and celebrating. How could that be? Instead of condemning the Grinch for his devious thievery, they recognized his lonely, self-imposed imprisonment, took pity, and invited him to join them.

For all the joy and merriment of the Christmas season, there are countless outsiders looking in – those who have lost loved ones, those stuck far away from home, those with no home, those isolated from others by choice or circumstance. More than anything else, Christmas is about finding unity and community with others. In Whoville that year, the recognition that the Grinch was not evil, but lonely and isolated, redeemed one forlorn soul and brought him back into a community of love, acceptance, and joy.

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<sup>24</sup> Excerpt from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Dr. Seuss, 1957.

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on a person you know whom you could bring into your community this Christmas? What would that require of you? Ponder these questions during a time of quiet reflection.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 6*

### **Reading:**

*“Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your soul.”<sup>25</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

According to the author of 1 Peter, the ultimate outcome of our faith is “an indescribable and glorious joy.” As I have tried to emphasize throughout these meditations on the Christmas season, we do not have to believe the Christmas story as recorded in the Gospels as literal or historical fact. Indeed, holding to a strictly literal understanding actually *inhibits* our ability to apply the story to our own lives. Few if any of us have ever seen angels or shepherds or Magi, yet the types of beings represented by them in the Christmas story are all around us in family, co-workers, and friends.

We have overly romanticized and divinized the characters and circumstances of the birth of Jesus to the point where our only option is to *worship* him instead of doing as he requested – to *follow* him. We cannot follow someone into 1<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem any more than we could follow Alice into Wonderland. But once we are able to insert our story and circumstances into their parallels in the Christmas story we realize we can not only find ourselves in the narrative, but we are already a part of the narrative. And there we can find an indescribable and glorious joy, even in the ordinariness of our everyday lives.

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Peter 1:8

**Closing Meditation:**

Where do you find parallels in your life to the Christmas story? How can it come alive for you this season? Ponder these questions during a time of quiet reflection.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Joy, Day 7*

### **Reading:**

*“While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them at the inn”<sup>26</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

Whether we believe the actual birth of Jesus to be an *extra*-magical event that occurred in a cattle-stall in 1<sup>st</sup> century Bethlehem is probably not the important point of the story. The more important point is that a baby was born in challenging circumstances...and God was with him. There is nothing magical or unusual about that because it has been repeated countless times every day since, up to, and including today. Even those of us privileged enough to have been born to two loving parents with a home to grow up in face numerous challenges, not the least of which is making room for a new life to grow and thrive. Parenting is an all-consuming, transformative task with its own unique demands and rewards.

Christmas for us, however, is less about a baby being born somewhere far off in space and time and more about a new life emerging from within us. Like a human newborn, that new life requires space and attention. It requires a rearranging of schedules and priorities in ways that accommodate its needs. Such changes bring their own challenges, demands, and rewards. Like parenting, the birth of the Christ-child within changes us in irreversible ways. And we would not have it any other way.

### **Closing Meditation:**

In what ways can you rearrange your life in order to make room for the holy child within you to emerge and grow? How can it become a living reality for you this season and always? Ponder these questions during a time of quiet reflection.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

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<sup>26</sup> Luke 2:6-7



## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 1*

### **Reading:**

*‘If I give away all my possessions...but do not have love, I gain nothing.’<sup>27</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The fourth theme of Advent is *Love*, a term which so has many meanings and applications in English as to almost be meaningless. With respect to the birth of the Christ-child within, *Love* is a verb, meaning it refers to *transformative action*. If we admire a manger scene, we may say we *love* the nativity, but neither we nor the portrayal are changed by that sort of adoration. If we *love* hearing the Christmas story read on Christmas Eve, we may experience a moment of good feelings, but neither we nor others are transformed in any significant way by that sort of appreciation. The *Love* offered at Christmastime is usually presented in words or imagery and nice feelings may accompany it, but if we do not embody those words and images in concrete *action*, meaning personal change or repentance, that type of love vanishes as quickly as autumn leaves in the winter wind.

The *Love* of Christmas is an inner state directed outward. *Transformative Love* is a circuit – it is sent out, received, and returned in some fashion, which is what makes it transformational. And love that is not directed outward cannot return to or change us. If it is not given by us *and* received by another, it may be a nice gesture but it is not *Love*. Love of self is important, but the transforming impacts of *Love* come from having loving actions we freely initiated toward others return to us. And sincere, unconditional acts of *Love* do return to us, although not always as or when we expect.

Transformational *Love* perpetuates itself through its circular movement between beings.

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:3

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on a time you experienced a loving act that was transformational. What set it apart from other experiences? Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

**Optional Music Video:** *The Love That You Are*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b6cSMHLx40>)

## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 2*

### **Reading:**

*“(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”<sup>28</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is *apathy* – not caring, not seeing another, acting as if the other does not exist or that I have no responsibility for them. The presence of homeless and other marginalized persons in our midst is a manifestation of our lack of commitment to love, in the sense of caring for and about others, both as individuals and as a society. I remember being told that the most longed for word any of us wishes to hear from another is our name. Even when expressed in anger, frustration, or hatred, hearing my name spoken by another is an affirmation of my being, that someone recognizes me. Being ignored is a horrible punishment.

While romantic and emotional expressions of love are important, they are not necessarily love’s highest expressions. Nor are they what Jesus modeled for us to offer to others. The love Jesus modeled is *active*. Jesus did not just feel bad for the sick; Jesus *healed* the sick. He did not just feel sad for the hungry; he *fed* the hungry. He did not just weep for the social outcasts; he *included* the outcasts and *affirmed* their presence by seeing and including them. *That* is the nature of the love-theme of Advent, and that is the type of love to which we are called.

We do not have to like or agree with those we love, but we must acknowledge them and offer assistance as we are able in their times of need.

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<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:7

**Closing Meditation:**

Recall a time you helped another with no expectation of receiving anything in return, even a “Thank you”. Recall a time you received something from another with no expectation of a return. What was different about those experiences?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 3*

### **Reading:**

*“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.”<sup>29</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

Love is hard. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles. On foot, for a healthy person keeping a steady pace, the journey would require at least two days. Joseph, however, had a very pregnant wife traveling with him. As such, the journey probably required four or more days, if not a week or more. Traveling through the hills and on the rough roads would have been a grueling, exhausting experience. To complete the journey would require a relentless focus on the end goal – in this case, Bethlehem.

As we seek to be reborn with Christ, our process of rebirth will take us through hills and valleys, times of doubt, times of joy, and times of difficulty. Like Joseph and Mary, completing the journey requires a relentless focus on the end goal. Unlike Joseph and Mary, our end goal is not a specific place. How will we know when we have arrived? How will we know if we are on the correct road? How will we even know where to begin? Answers to questions like these can only be discerned through prayer and faith, for there are no cookbook-like instructions for rebirth.

Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was not a conscious decision on Joseph and Mary’s part. It was because they were in Bethlehem for the census when the child was ready to be born. In a similar way, we cannot always control the circumstances under which we encounter Emmanuel – God with us. It may come at a most unexpected and inconvenient time, but if we seek it, it will come.

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 2:1,4

**Closing Meditation:**

Sit quietly and contemplate the ways in which Emmanuel might enter into your life.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 4*

### **Reading:**

*“And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”<sup>30</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

This passage from Luke is referred to as *Mary’s Song of Praise*, or *The Magnificat*. It is Mary’s response to learning she is carrying the Son of God, the Messiah. According to biblical accounts, Emmanuel comes to earth through Mary. Being young, unmarried, and pregnant would not have been good news to women of her or any era. However, the angel Gabriel assured Mary she had been *chosen* to birth the one who would become known as God’s son. She found *favor* with God, meaning God loved and trusted her enough to use her in a very special way. The news filled her with joy, in spite of the challenges it would present.

God’s favor still falls on us today. When God chooses to take on human flesh and walk among us, that adventure begins as a baby, born of a human mother. It was a physical birth for Jesus, as it is for all of us. While Jesus’ birth through Mary was physical, the Christ’s birth within us is from the Spirit, as was the case with Jesus. Emmanuel, the true gift of Christmas, is God with us. Once we become consciously aware that God is with us, God can work in and through us. The gift of Emmanuel is given freely to all who will accept it. God’s favor is given to us, and we respond to and perpetuate God’s favor by passing the blessings it brings on to others.

### **Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on the ways God’s favor has manifested in your life.  
Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

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<sup>30</sup> Luke 1:46-48



## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 5*

### **Reading:**

*“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.”<sup>31</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Doris.”

“Doris who?”

“Doris locked, that’s why I’m knocking!”

There is a painting in many churches of Jesus standing at a door, knocking. The door has no outside handle so Jesus can only enter if the person behind the door opens it for him. It is a visual portrayal of Revelation 3:20: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking.” He assures us that if we open the door and let him in, he will abide with us. Jesus cannot enter, however, without a willing invitation and an open door. The Love of God is freely given and can only be received freely.

Likewise, the Christ-child cannot enter into us without our intentional, conscious invitation and desire to receive it. In order to receive the Christ, however, changes to our lives are required. Both Jesus and John the Baptist told their followers to *repent*, which means to change. When our days are filled with distractions and earthly obligations, there is no space for transformation to occur. We must willingly release that which holds us back to create space for the Christ to fill.

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<sup>31</sup> Revelation 3:20-21

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on the activities in your life that stand in the way of opening the door for Christ. How could you rearrange your obligations to make space for a conscious awareness of Emmanuel?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Season of Advent: Love, Day 6*

### **Reading:**

*“...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>32</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

When I consider what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus the Christ, I must reflect on what it means to love God and others. Indeed, Jesus told his disciples the most important commandment was to love God, followed closely by loving our neighbor as ourselves. That leads me to consider the different forms love takes. Certainly that does not mean we should love all those living in close proximity to us in a romantic way, as we would a spouse or significant other. Nor does it necessarily mean we are to love them as we would an infant, being available around the clock for their every need. On the other hand, it cannot mean loving inanimately, as we might love a book, a landscape, or a television show.

Nevertheless, love takes many forms, and we do ourselves and others a disservice by confusing love with lust, infatuation, or other fleeting emotions. Christian love requires sacrifice and focused attention over whatever amount of time is required to the best of our ability to do so. Everyone in our lives has needs, if only occasionally, for attention, recognition, and company. If we love them as we should, we will sacrifice at least some of our time and resources to help meet their needs, perhaps with a meal, a card, a call, or a visit. Obviously, during times of acute and critical needs, our love draws us to them even more.

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew 22:37,39

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect upon someone in your life who could use some of your attention now. What could you do *today* to help them? What are the barriers to helping them?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *Christmas Eve*

### **Reading:**

*“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”<sup>33</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

Beneath the love we seek on earth is our mostly unconscious desire to be reunited with God who, though ever-present, exists beyond our conscious grasp. If lust seeks to satisfy earthly desires, *Love* seeks more—something inclusive of our earthly state, but with deeper and eternal roots. That sort of *Love* is animated by and given through the Spirit, meaning the Spirit brings *Love* to Life – gives it breath, depth, and verdancy. The Christmas story tells how Jesus was conceived by the uniting of the Spirit of God with the body of Mary, which is to say that heaven and earth came together to form something greater than either could produce alone.

Jesus walked the earth, fully Spirit and fully human. And that is the *Love* we seek – to have our spiritual and human natures united as one which, like Jesus, is our essential nature. To be complete; to be whole. *Love*, at its core, is all about union, or *re-union*. Like gravity, *Love* draws and binds us to the object of our love. Like Jesus, we too were born of the Spirit – through the sexual union of our parents, yes, but the indwelling of the Spirit is what animates and makes us consciously *alive*. As we learn to consciously express both our spiritual and physical natures, our lives become a Light for others – the *Light* of God shining through us. And the darkness, evil, ignorance, violence, and illness of this earth cannot overcome the Light emanating from that *Love*. It only takes a spark...

### **Closing Meditation:**

Sit in silence and imagine the Light and Love of God permeating every part of your being.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

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<sup>33</sup> John 1:3-5



## *Christmas Day*

### **Reading:**

*“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”<sup>34</sup>*

### **Meditation:**

#### **Embrace the Darkness**

Everything in creation manifests in darkness.

The Bible’s first creation story reads:

*“...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”*

All life emerges from under the cover of darkness:

A mother’s womb; the ocean depths; seeds buried in the ground.

We only fear darkness because we do not comprehend it.

What we perceive as the color black is not a color at all –

Black is latent energy that holds all color within itself,

Just as the tiny acorn holds the giant oak.

When light shines in the darkness

An endless diversity of shapes and hues is suddenly revealed.

As darkness is impregnated by the Light of Spirit

The created universe bursts forth into conscious awareness.

What we call darkness is the part of reality our senses cannot differentiate

Since our bodies process but a fraction of God’s reality;

The rest is darkness to us.

Far from being evil, darkness is the ground of all being prior to our awareness of it.

Darkness is where new life begins.

This Christmas, embrace the darkness as you pray for the Light.

### **Optional Music Video: *Embrace the Darkness***

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf7SM4kLCak>)

### **Closing Meditation:**

Sit in silent stillness and embrace the spirit of Christmas within you.

Journal your thoughts and feelings.

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<sup>34</sup> John 1:5



## *The First Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!”<sup>35</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

December 26<sup>th</sup> begins the *Twelve Days of Christmas*, the period of time between Christmas and Epiphany, or between the birth of Jesus and his revelation as a child of God. The twelve days of Christmas are best known by a Christmas song that seems non-sensical, at least to me. For many in the West, by December 26<sup>th</sup> we are returning gifts, shopping for bargains, and planning for New Year’s Eve and the New Year. In many Eastern Christian traditions, however, December 25<sup>th</sup> is not the day Christmas is celebrated. Rather, it is January 6<sup>th</sup>, *Epiphany*, which symbolizes the arrival of the Magi and the recognition of the divine nature of the child.

Each of the twelve days of Christmas symbolize a significant tenet of the faith, as revealed by its number. Each of the numbers also have non-religious and geometric inferences dating back thousands of years. All told, the twelve days of Christmas tell a Christian story *and* a broader, ecumenical story of the foundations of human wholeness. The twelve days can help us understand our personal journey towards wholeness, or *holiness*, and the revelation of our divine nature.

The first day of Christmas, represented by the number 1, reminds us of our belief in One God. It also signifies the ultimate goal of our Christian faith – to become One with God and with each other. In truth, our essential being has always been One with God, but we are not consciously aware of it. Being consciously aware of our Oneness with God means we accept God as an intimate presence in every aspect of our lives – God lives our lives with and through us. Once that Oneness becomes a lived reality, our lives become a continuous prayer.

In the song, the gift on the first day of Christmas is a partridge in a pear tree. Symbolically, the partridge represents Jesus and the pear tree represents the cross.

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<sup>35</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

**Closing Meditation:**

Consider how your Oneness with God manifests in ways you do not consciously notice.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Second Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“God...separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome...the second day.”<sup>36</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

In the Christmas song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, the gift of the second day is two turtle doves, which are traditional symbols of love, peace, and sacrifice.

One of the mysteries of life on earth is the way seemingly everything is divided into two parts – the first day of creation divided light from the dark; the second day separated the sky from the waters; the third day divided the waters from the dry land, and so on until finally dividing humankind into male and female. In the process of creation, the One appears to become Two. The various manifestations of *twoness*, however, cannot exist without each other so we know, in their essence and in spite of appearances, they are still One. The two sides of every reality exist in a complementary tension, and it is that tension – the interplay between the extremes – that animates earthly life. With no tension, there is no movement and no life. A pendulum must swing *both* ways to perform as it was designed.

As such, the second day of Christmas reminds us of the dual nature of creation’s appearance. It is easy and natural for us to label one part of something *good* and the other *bad*, but that does not honor the fact that both are part of the same reality. Our challenge in seeking Oneness with God and others is to not see things in opposition to each other but to understand how their complementary energies can be integrated to work toward a common purpose – harnessing the energy in the inherent tension between the two to lead us back to Oneness.

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<sup>36</sup> Genesis 1:7-8

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on situations where you find yourself in apparent opposition to another. How can you harness the tension to lead to useful outcomes? Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Third Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’”<sup>37</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The gift of the third day of Christmas, in the song, is three French Hens. Traditionally, the three hens represent the virtues of faith, hope, and love, as well as the three gifts of the Magi for the baby Jesus – gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The number three often brings to mind the three manifestations of God known as the *Trinity*: Father, Son, and Spirit – or Creator, Created, and Relationship. Three also represents three of the common ways we experience God: beyond us, around us, and within us. As with the apparent dualism of the second day, the *three-ness* of God does not imply three Gods, but One God manifesting in three unique ways.

The third day of creation separated the seas from the dry land, allowing vegetation to emerge and providing cover for the land and food for the yet-to-be-created animal kingdom.

Geometrically, two points form a line and three points, a triangle. A line exists in one dimension (length) while a triangle adds a second dimension (length and width). In that sense, the separation of the seas from dry land on the third day added another dimension to life on earth.

The number three symbolizes understanding and stability. Just as a three-legged stool sits stably on nearly any surface, so understanding provides a stabilizing perspective on our sometimes confusing life experiences.

The number three is seen in many common cycles on earth, like past, present, and future or birth, life, and death. Basic musical chords are made up of three notes (first, third, and fifth), which adds a dimension of harmonic fullness not present in individual notes.

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<sup>37</sup> Genesis 1:9

### Contemplative Christmas

The third day of Christmas takes us deeper and more fully into our earthly manifestation as children of God.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

In what ways does your life experience manifest in threes?  
Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Fourth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.”<sup>38</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The number four is reflected in many aspects of creation: the four seasons (winter, spring, summer, fall) and four directions (north, east, west, south). There are also the four base elements of earth, water, fire and air. In Christianity, there are four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and four horsemen in Revelation of John. In Buddhism there are the Four Sights of the Buddha that inspired his quest for enlightenment and the Four Noble Truths.

In the Christmas song, the four calling birds represent the four gospels. That they are *calling out* signifies the spreading of the good news of God’s presence in our world.

Four is a number of stability, order, and symmetry, as demonstrated by the four sides of a square or rectangle. The shapes of squares and rectangles remind us of doors and windows, which allow us a measure of control over what enters and exits from our environment. They can let in physical light to brighten a dark room, or they can symbolically allow insight or *enlightenment* into our conscious awareness. In that context, the symbolism of the number four implies a sense of control over the intermingling of our inner and outer lives.

On the fourth day of creation, God separated the light from the darkness, creating a light to rule the day (the sun) and lights to rule the night (the moon and stars). Among the gifts of the fourth day of Christmas are order and insight as well as a balance between the known and the unknown.

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<sup>38</sup> Genesis 1:19

**Closing Meditation:**

Sit in silence and ponder the aspects of your life experience that seem to manifest in stable, ordered ways.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Fifth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."<sup>39</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

On the fifth day of creation, as recorded in Genesis, God called for the creation of "swarms of living creatures" in the waters, as well as "every winged bird of every kind." In other words, on the fifth day, God filled the seas and the skies with animal life.

In the Christmas song, the gift of the fifth day is *five golden rings*. Some say the five rings represent the first five books of the Bible – the *Torah* or *Pentateuch* – which are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The five wounds of Jesus on the cross, the five letters in his name, and the five human senses are also manifestations of the number five, as are the five virtues of knighthood (generosity, friendship, chastity, chivalry, and piety).

The number five is sometimes used to represent a human being, imaged as the 5-pointed star that can be traced around the top of one's head, outstretched arms, and legs spread wide apart. Five is associated with the powers of *mediation* and *joining together*, since human beings are sometimes imagined as the mediators and uniters between the non-human forms of earthly life and the spiritual realm. In addition, the ancient science of *Numerology* suggests that the number five symbolizes the concepts of freedom, curiosity, transformation, and evolution, all shared attributes of humankind.

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<sup>39</sup> Genesis 1:20

### Contemplative Christmas

What does the seemingly random accumulation of associations with particular numbers mean in practical terms? That is a difficult question to answer given that we live in an age of reason and literalism. The symbolic meanings of numbers, as with the associations to the *gifts* in the Christmas song, were formed long ago and are rooted in the *collective unconscious*, which does not make them less real, only less obvious. I will reflect more on this in the coming days.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

Sit quietly and reflect on your experience of these post-Christmas days. Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Sixth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’”<sup>40</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

On the sixth day of the Bible’s allegorical story of creation, God created humankind. The reference to *God* in this passage is *plural* and the context is *communal*, which is a strong hint that the nature of God is far different than traditional teachings of God as a single, masculine (white) entity. In this story, humankind is given *dominion* over the other life-forms on earth and told to be fruitful and multiply. *Dominion*, in this context, does not infer that we can use the rest of creation for personal gain at another’s expense. Rather, it means that God has given humankind responsibility for establishing a balanced oversight that honors and protects *all* of creation.

The gift of the sixth day of Christmas in the song is *six geese a-laying*. The *six* signifies the six days of active creation, and the laying of eggs refers to new life and renewal. The six-pointed Star of David is a common symbol of Judaism. Six symbolizes a transition from one stage of life to another.

Six is also where much of the complexity surrounding number-symbolism ramps up. Larger numbers become multiples of smaller numbers and so may repeat themes of the smaller numbers but at a higher level – picture a point on a spiral circling back over the same area but on a higher tier. For example,  $2 \times 3 = 6$ , so part of the symbolism of six is a product of the symbolism of 2 and 3.

Perhaps the most significant meaning of the number 6 is that while one phase of creation is finishing, the work and progress of what has been created is only beginning. The birth or emergence of the Christ-child within is a *start*, but the consummation of that new birth – having it live into its purpose and develop its potential – is an entirely new journey that begins *now*. As with the last day of the calendar year, today may be a conclusion, but it is not the end.

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<sup>40</sup> Genesis 1:26

**Closing Meditation:**

In stillness, consider what is ending in your life and what is opening up before you.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Seventh Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work...done in creation.”<sup>41</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

The seventh day of creation symbolizes a day of *rest* from one’s labors, as opposed to a day of *completion*. The cycles of creation, life, and work are just that: *cycles*. Regular times of rest are necessary for renewing our ability to work, not to escape from or end it. The gift of the seventh day in the song is *seven-swans-a-swimming*, which represent the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit from Isaiah 11:2-3: *wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord*. Swans are symbols of grace and ease, reflecting the transformative impact of the Spirit’s gifts when incorporated into one’s life.

The number seven is important in Islam in the *seven heavens*, circling the *Kaaba* seven times, and the seven verses in the Quran’s first chapter. Seven also represents a *complete* world – having what it needs to perpetuate itself – because of the seven-day cycle of creation. There are seven days in a week, seven wonders of the world, and seven continents. A sense of *separation* or *division* is contained in the imagery of seven, as in the separation of one week or phase from another. It is a recurrent number in the Bible, particularly in the Revelation of John. In mathematics, seven is said to have peculiar and mysterious qualities. In music, there are seven distinct notes in the diatonic scale.

In considering the twelve days of Christmas as a *journey* towards spiritual maturity, each number symbolizes various aspects of that experience that all beings throughout history share in common. Seven, and what it symbolizes, begins the second half of that journey since the 12 days of Christmas can be divided into two halves of 6 each – days 1-6 and days 7-12. The seventh day of Christmas is a liminal or transitional space since every ending contains within it the beginning of whatever is next.

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 2:3

**Closing Meditation:**

Reflect on your seventh day of Christmas as a time of transition. What is changing in your life now?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Eighth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

“And the (side) that the Lord God had taken from the man (God) made into a woman...”<sup>42</sup>

### **Reflection:**

In the song, the gift of the eighth day of Christmas is *Eight Maids a-Milking*. The eight maids signify the eight Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>43</sup> The work of *milking* is a menial but necessary task that elicits images of the types of humility and nurturance called for in the Beatitudes. The number 8, when turned on its side, is the symbol for *infinity*.

On what could be considered the eighth day of creation, or the beginning of a new cycle of creation, God split the androgenous human into two halves – male and female. Much unnecessary suffering has resulted from the questionable translation of the Hebrew word for *side* in Genesis as *rib*. In common readings, woman was created from a *rib* of the man, often assumed to imply inferiority and laying the foundation for generations of patriarchal domination. When that word is more correctly translated as *side* or *half*, the woman and man become co-equal *sides* of humankind – masculine and feminine. In other words, the first created human being (in the allegorical Genesis story) was *wholly human*, containing *both* male and female aspects. This separation of male and female integrates the symbolism of the number 2, which is the splitting of One into two parts or sides, with the number 4, which symbolizes *stability, order, and symmetry*. The number 8 is the product of 2 x 4. As the male and female *natures* of humankind are rejoined in relationship, the result is a more stable, complete entity.

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<sup>42</sup> Genesis 2:22

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 5:3-10

### Contemplative Christmas

In the 7-day cycle of creation, the eighth day begins the cycle again, but at a different level. The coupling (or recoupling) of masculine and feminine energies allows two people to function at higher level together than either alone. Thus, eight is often associated with *perfection*. In the eight Beatitudes, Jesus couples pairs of opposites: being poor with possessing; mourning with comforting; oppression with justice; and so on. Joining a need with what is lacking creates the conditions for both the need and its fulfillment to find *perfection* or completion in each other.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

As the New Year begins, ponder ways you might live your life at a higher level of conscious awareness.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Ninth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*Symbols, like poetry, express what cannot be said.*<sup>44</sup>

### **Reflection:**

In the song, the gift of the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas is *nine ladies dancing*. Nine refers to the nine fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*.<sup>45</sup> Dancing is an expression of joy and celebration. Together, they hint at the joy awaiting for those living in ways consistent with the promptings of the Spirit.

Numerically, nine represents the completion of the first cycle in our base-ten counting system. As with numbers ending other cycles (i.e., 3 for life-phases, 4 for seasons, 7 for days in a week) 9 represents the completion of a *cycle*, not a termination. Such *end* numbers symbolize a type of coming full-circle and reapproaching where we began, with the implication of an imminent new beginning and the opportunity to begin again with a new focus. It invites us to pause, take stock of where we've been, and prepare for the next round. As such, nine often symbolizes *transformation*.

Understanding the symbolism of images and numbers is a science, but not in the way we define science today. For starters, there are no firm or final answers in symbolism. Its benefits come in the form of non-verbal *hints* or *intuitions* that lead to greater, but never complete understandings. As we learn that our conscious awareness – thoughts, dreams, and images – comes from somewhere outside our body (no one has ever found a single thought, image, or dream in any part of our body), we can better understand that we are constantly engaged with otherworldly (non-physical) sources of knowledge and wisdom. Most of what enters our conscious awareness is familiar. Much more exists in relative proximity to what is familiar, which allows us to expand our understandings. Infinitely more exists in what pioneering psychiatrist, Carl Jung, termed the *collective*

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<sup>44</sup> Paraphrase of statement by Ami Rosenberg, *The Book of Symbols*, TASCHEN, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

### Contemplative Christmas

*unconscious*, which I sometimes imagine to be the *mind of God*. The entire history of created life, symbolized in part by the twelve days of Christmas, is stored in divine consciousness, and although symbols may seem trite to our daily awareness, symbolism does speak to and connect with us from deeper levels of consciousness.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

Silently reflect on areas where you are being encouraged to *transform* in this phase of your life.

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Tenth Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

*“Transformation is a process. The accurate language for faith is not that ‘we are saved’ but that we are ‘being saved.’”<sup>46</sup>*

### **Reflection:**

In the song, the gift of the tenth day of Christmas is *ten-Lords-a-leaping*. Ten refers to the Ten Commandments, and *Lords* imply authority or governing power. Thus, this gift refers to the potential governing power of the Ten Commandments of Judeo-Christian history. Ten is also an important number in other religious systems, including Hinduism with the Ten Avatars of Vishnu.

The number 10 has many symbolic implications. It often signifies *universality* since it combines 1 for *new beginnings* and 0 for *wholeness* or *infinite potential*. Ten is also the sum of the numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4, so it contains symbolic inferences from each of those numbers, too. Some consider 10 to be the *ideal* or *perfect number* that bridges the physical and spiritual worlds. Because 10 begins the second counting cycle of base-ten numbers it symbolizes beginning again or rebirth, but at a higher level of understanding and capability.

Regarding the symbolism of the 12 days of Christmas and how it impacts us, yesterday I wrote that “no one has ever found a single thought, image, or dream in any part of our body.” Many assume consciousness originates from and resides in the brain, which is simply not true. Our brain and nervous system are intermediaries that translate non-physical energies into physical action. They are where spirit connects with body. It is not so much that our consciousness exists outside of our body as that consciousness exists in a non-physical realm – in another dimension, perhaps. Bodies have tangible limits to their expression, but consciousness does not. Nor is our consciousness ours alone but is intertwined with others across space and time. Religious and other symbolism, including that of the 12 days of Christmas, connects our experience to the vast universe of consciousness.

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, August 4, 2024.

### Contemplative Christmas

The unfathomable span and depth of consciousness is the source of every creative act – from the creation of the universe, as told allegorically in Genesis, to every poem, painting, piece of music, kindness, and every other creative expression. Unseen energy (inspiration) enters into us, is modified by our particular nature, and emerges into the world through us.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

As you ponder the past year, what lessons-learned do you hope to carry into the new one?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Eleventh Day of Christmas*

### **Reading:**

“...one of the men who have accompanied us...must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Reflection:**

The gift of the eleventh day of Christmas in the song is *eleven pipers piping*. Eleven refers to the 11 *faithful* disciples, which excludes Judas. Pipers are known to lead others with music. So the song’s symbolism refers to the disciple’s role in leading others to faith in God.

The number 11 elicits seemingly conflicting imagery. On the one hand, it sometimes represents *incompleteness*, positioned as it is between two numbers of *completion* – 10 and 12. For example, following the death of Judas, the first decision for the remaining 11 disciples was to select another follower to bring their number back to 12. Alternatively, 11 displays *symmetry* and *balance*, composed as it is of two identical numbers positioned side by side.

In reflecting on various meanings of the 12 days of Christmas I have shared different ways to think about them, from fundamental Christian imagery that will be meaningful to some and trite to others, to obscure concepts from ancient sciences like *Numerology* and timeless symbolic inferences often used in dream interpretation. Unfortunately, to keep these reflections short (and to accommodate my limited depth of knowledge), I provided little justification for any of them.

One reason symbols like words, images, and numbers are worthy of our attention is *not* to answer life’s perplexing questions but to experience the bottomless well of possibility that presents itself as we explore beyond the literal meanings of them. Literalism usually provides only the shallowest of understandings. Particularly when words, images, or numbers recur in our lives, whether in dreams, readings, or circumstance, it is an invitation to explore *less-than-obvious* possibilities. For example, 40 is

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<sup>47</sup> Acts 1:21-22.

## Contemplative Christmas

a common recurring number in the Bible, as in the 40 years of wandering in the desert by the Israelites, Noah's 40 days and nights of rain on the ark, and Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. Such recurrences hint that 40 is *more* than a space filler between 39 and 41. 40 years does *not* mean 40 literal years; it means a *long time* – perhaps a lifetime or a generation or an extended cycle of transformation. Symbolic significance is revealed by considering what the symbol meant to past generations in the context of the current circumstances of our lives.

### **Closing Meditation:**

What word, image, or number is recurring in my life? How might I understand it differently?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## *The Twelfth Day of Christmas: Epiphany*

### **Reading:**

“...(Magi) from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’”<sup>48</sup>

### **Reflection:**

The gift of the twelfth day of Christmas, according to the song, is *twelve drummers drumming*. The number 12 is associated with perfection, completeness, and harmony. Drumming symbolizes the steady, continuous rhythms of life, like a beating heart. Together, they represent the progressive movement of God’s work on earth. Twelve is a recurring number in religious symbolism, from the 12 disciples to the 12 tribes of Israel to the 12 Imams of Islam. There are also 12 months in a year and 12 astrological houses in the heavens.

The twelfth day of Christmas is *Epiphany*. It signifies the day of the arrival of the Magi from the East, offering their gifts and paying homage to the Christ-child. An *epiphany* is a realization, when something murky becomes clearer. In the context of Christmas, the *epiphany* is that the birth of the Christ-child represents the perfect union of spirit and matter. The recognition of Jesus as fully divine *and* fully human, combined with Jesus’ instruction to *follow* leads us to the epiphany that we, too, are fully divine and fully human.

It is interesting that the *Magi* are so strongly associated with the Epiphany since they were foreigners and practitioners of esoteric sciences like astrology and alchemy, likely frowned upon by Jews and Romans alike. This affirms to me that Jesus did not come to start a new religion or to evangelize others to Judaism but to demonstrate a way of life applicable to those practicing *any* or *no* religion. It was a group of non-Jews who revealed the deeper, universal significance of this birth.

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<sup>48</sup> Matthew 2:2

### Contemplative Christmas

The journey from Thanksgiving to Epiphany is just that – a journey, a process, a progression. It is a continuous cycle that repeats every year as if to remind us of the divine nature we each possess but too often forget, ignore, or repress. It begins with *gratitude*, and leads to *hope, peace, love, and joy*. It moves steadily toward *birth* (or rebirth) and returns us to where we began, but with deeper insights, knowledge, and wisdom – an *epiphany* for the consummation of life on earth.

#### **Closing Meditation:**

In silent meditation, consider what insights have been revealed to you this season. What will you carry with you into the rebirth of this cycle of your life?

Journal the thoughts and feelings that arise.

## About the Author

Greg Hildenbrand lives south of Lawrence, Kansas. He has two adult children, Grace and Reid. Greg is a contemplative spiritual director, author, songwriter, and a volunteer leader of blended worship at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Lawrence. He is a sendee of the *Living School* at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM, and is certified in Spiritual Guidance by the Shalem Institute in Washington, D.C. His weekly *Life Notes* blog, podcasts, music, music videos, books, and other information are available at his website: [www.ContemplatingGrace.com](http://www.ContemplatingGrace.com).

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