

Dear Pastor

Advent Letters

Seeking advice, finding Christ



Introduction: Advent Letters

Advent is a season of waiting and watching, remembering Christ's first coming and anticipating his coming again. We live between promise and fulfillment, between what has been and what will be.

Advent finds all of us in the real honest moments of our lives. Christ enters our hearts, not because they are perfect but because they have been broken open before him.

These letters are like the little cracks in our hearts that pastors have the opportunity to witness. The stories behind these letters come from my own pastoral experience and those of my friends and colleagues.

These letters come from real lives: kitchens, hospital rooms, strained relationships, quiet doubts. In these letters we hear grief, exhaustion, conflict, and longing. They are not polished theology. They are lived theology.

We've asked a variety of pastors and church leaders to answer these questions reflecting on the hope, joy, love, and peace that Advent offers to all. May you reflect on our humanness as we prepare for Christ to enter our hearts once more.

Karie Charlton

Week 1: Hope
Longing, disruption and honest reality

Week 1 Prayer

God of the long night,
We come to you tired, grieving, frustrated and unsure.
We carry burdens we cannot name aloud.
Meet us here exactly as we are.
Teach us to wait with honesty. Teach us that hope does not ignore the darkness but rather trusts that you are already at work within it.
Amen.

Day 1

"We wait for it with patience." Romans 8:25

Dear Pastor,
I've been reading our Advent devotional this year, but I keep coming back to a simple question: What are we actually waiting for? I understand that we're preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth, but that already happened. And we also talk about waiting for Christ to come again. So I find myself caught between remembering and anticipating, not sure what I'm supposed to be doing. What does it mean to live in that in-between space?

I've often treated Advent as a countdown to Christmas. But I know there is something deeper just out of my grasp. What does it mean to be people who wait? And what exactly are we waiting for?

Sincerely,
Learning to Wait

Dear Learning to Wait,
When I was a child, as Christmas approached, I had to wait a lot. Waited for the Christmas tree to be decorated, waited for the relatives to arrive, waited for my father's Christmas Eve sermon to be over, waited for my new Western Flyer bicycle to make its Christmas morning appearance. The thing was, I knew what I was waiting for. I was waiting for *something* to happen. Sometimes it happened; sometimes it didn't.

Waiting is more complicated now. Advent devotional guides endlessly remind us that we're waiting for the Incarnation and, beyond that, for the dawn of the promised Kingdom, when justice will roll down like waters, etc. And every year, as the sun rises on December 26, the world is the same as it was the day before. God may have entered human life, but not much else seems to have changed.

A few years ago I began to wonder whether waiting for something that hasn't happened yet is what Advent is all about. What if, instead, we think of Advent as a time for discovering what is already here? What if the *something* we look for isn't out there somewhere, but is really within and among and around us? We tend to think of the Holy One as something far away, over and against us, something Other. What if the Holy One is here and has been here in the heart of us all along, from the very moment we were created in *imago Dei*? What if the Holy One is with us, within us, is us? Maybe that's the real message of Advent.

If you're having difficulty seeing what we're waiting for, maybe it's time to stop waiting. Maybe it's time to seek the presence of the Eternal in the interstices of the Now. Maybe that's where it's been all along.

Sincerely,
Pastor Paul

Day 2

"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me." Psalm 6:2

Dear Pastor,
I'm writing this late at night after wrapping gifts. The house looks beautiful. Everything is in place. And I feel completely invisible.

My husband helps a little. He gets the ornaments and decorations out of the attic, but I do the decorating. He enthusiastically attends the kids' school play and Christmas pageant, but I take them to practice and make the costumes. I make the budget, purchase the gifts and wrap them — and he will be just as surprised as the kids when they open their presents.

This year I filled my own stocking. Standing there choosing things for myself so I wouldn't be left out, I felt strangely sad. I couldn't remember the last time someone thought to make and fill a stocking for me. Where is the line between being selfless and being overlooked? How do I ask for what I need?

Sincerely,
Tired of Carrying It All

Dear Tired of Carrying It All,
You have named your grief perfectly: an empty stocking. It isn't the gifts that matter. It's knowing that you've been seen — that while you were thinking about everyone else's Christmas, someone was thinking about yours. It hurts to be always the magic maker and rarely the magic receiver.

Sit with that for a moment, because your grief deserves to be honored. You stand among countless people who carry the invisible labor of making holidays happen.

Our faith tells us that we serve a God who sees. Hagar, alone in the wilderness, names God El Roi: "the God who sees me." Perhaps, before you do anything more, write a letter to the God who sees you — not an inventory of everyone else's failures, but an acknowledgment of the love and labor you have poured out. Your care matters even when the people you love fail to notice it.

Then talk with your husband. Tell him what you told me: "When I filled my own stocking, I realized how sad it made me. I want Christmas too. I want to know that someone was thinking about me. Would you take care of my stocking this Christmas?" It may feel strange to ask for something you wish he simply knew to give. But asking for love in the form we need is not selfish. It is allowing ourselves to be known.

He may respond beautifully, or he may disappoint you. You cannot control that. But you can tell the truth about what you need. The God who sees your magic making also sees your grief. You are not invisible. And you are allowed to want to receive some Christmas magic, too.

With hope,
Pastor Laura

Day 3

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34

Dear Pastor,
My grandson asked my daughter what a virgin is because he heard that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. He's only in kindergarten, so she told him it meant Mary wasn't married yet. But we are sure he will ask again when he's older.

I have four children and two grandchildren, so I know how to explain how babies are made. But I don't know how to explain what the church means by "virgin birth." How do we explain virgin birth while still giving him correct information about women's bodies and how babies are conceived? How do we explain that God has done something that is medically impossible?

I want my grandson to grow up to be a good man who treats women well and goes to church.

Sincerely,
Raising the Next Generation

Dear Raising the Next Generation,
What does the church mean by "virgin birth"? It depends on whom you ask, and when.

To Matthew and Luke, the virgin birth meant the fulfillment of prophecy, and they crafted their birth narratives following Isaiah 7:14, guided by a translation that rendered "young woman" as "virgin." Mark and John don't mention Christ's birth at all. Neither does Paul. So Mary's virginity at Christ's birth might not have been a universally held belief.

To later theologians, the virgin birth meant the full divinity and humanity of Jesus, miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a woman. They thought Mary's virginity was necessary to protect the holiness of Jesus because original sin was passed down through sex. John Calvin was so troubled by the thought of Mary's sexual activity that he affirmed, against the biblical evidence for Jesus' siblings, her perpetual virginity.

Which brings us to — well, us. What do we mean when we recite the Apostles' Creed and say that Christ was "born of the Virgin Mary"? To many, this statement means a combination of prophecy, divinity, purity and miracle. But for others, it's a source of confusion. Does making a virtue of Mary's virginity signal our approval for the shame and silence of purity culture? Can we responsibly affirm the medically impossible in an age when disinformation threatens public health? And what might a five-year-old need to hear about all this?

Maybe we could say something like this: Long ago, God promised a child who would be a savior. This child was born not to a mighty man but to a wise, faithful young woman. This birth didn't happen against her will. It happened with her consent, as she said to God, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She raised Jesus to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, to feed the hungry and send the rich away empty. And others felt such healing in his presence that they said, "God is with us."

In solidarity,
Pastor Mike

Day 4

"Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you." Luke 6:27

Dear Pastor,
I know what Jesus says about loving your neighbor. The problem is that my actual neighbor is incredibly difficult. We've had ongoing conflict: complaints about my barking dog, passive-aggressive snubs. He even called the police when my son briefly parked in a no-parking zone so he could unload some boxes. I've tried being kind, but it never seems to change anything.

Instead, I find myself growing more irritated. I replay conversations in my head. I feel resentment building. What does love actually look like in a situation like this? It can't mean pretending everything is fine. But I don't want to become hardened either. How do I take Jesus seriously here without losing myself?

Sincerely,
Struggling Next Door

Dear Struggling,
I once had a downstairs neighbor who would get high and play his bass guitar at 3 a.m. on Sundays when I had to be up at 6, so hear me when I tell you I feel your pain!

There's just one problem: Christian faith *does* call us to lose ourselves. That's the principle behind the idea that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" that we encounter in Galatians 2:20. When Paul is furious with the Galatians in this letter. I don't write this reply to give you a pat Christian answer but rather to acknowledge that whatever course you take, it will cost you something.

Accountability requires us to love ourselves enough to be truthful with ourselves about whether we are really loving the way that Christ loves. Accountability also demands honesty of us in dealing with those whom we may struggle to like, let alone love. But remember this: Jesus loved the scribes and the Pharisees, and his love required him to tell them the truth.

I suspect you have to tell your neighbor the truth about how his behavior is affecting you, and to do so with *love*. This step may take some preparation before you can do so authentically. Some prayer should probably be involved. And you should also prepare for the possibility that he simply may not care. But even if he rebuffs your efforts, you will have been true to your Christian faith. You will have been honest, with love.

I don't envy you the task, but I recall this point from G. K. Chesterton that might help steel your nerves: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."
I'll pray for you as you seek to do what Christ calls you to do.

Pastor Baron

Day 5

"Love is patient; love is kind." 1 Corinthians 13:4

Dear Pastor,
I'm struggling with guilt and frustration about giving gifts to my mother-in-law. She is in active addiction and gives no indication that she wants to get clean. Over the years, Christmas has become complicated because she asks for expensive gifts and then returns or sells them to buy pills. My partner and I want to give her nice things, but she won't keep them when she needs a fix.

This year, we're considering giving her something less valuable or intentionally forgetting the gift receipt. We don't want to treat her as if she is less deserving of generosity and love, but we don't want to enable her bad habits. What does loving someone well actually look like when their addiction affects something as simple as gift giving?

Sincerely,
Trying to Love Wisely

Dear Trying to Love Wisely,
Addiction is a thief. It steals not only from the person who is addicted to substances or harmful practices, but also from all who love them and desire their healing and wholeness. You know this truth well. I hear your clear and compassionate intent to love your mother-in-law, even as she struggles with such a formidable barrier to her own thriving and yours.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16). The conundrum you describe – your mother-in-law's insistence on expensive gifts and subsequent practice of selling those gifts to feed the wolf of her addiction – calls forth your own adherence to Jesus' cautionary words.

You are already doing the difficult work of graciously separating your mother-in-law's true identity as a beloved child of God from the addiction that is stealing from her and, indirectly, from you. Your persistence in showing your love for her – as evidenced by your keen observation that she equates her perceived value in your and your husband's eyes with the monetary value of gifts – shows how much you notice and care. In this way, you are as innocent as a dove.

Now for the wise as serpents part. The intentional omission of a gift receipt is particularly crafty, though I'm not sure you'll feel good about that small deception in the end. Another way to show your love for your mother-in-law without threatening her fragile sense of belonging and belovedness would be to give the gift of an experience that you all could share. A family outing, paid for in advance, could create a positive and lasting memory for everyone. The gift of time is nonrefundable.

With Christ's love,
Pastor Austin

Day 6

"Come to me, all you who are weary... and I will give you rest" Matthew 11:28

Dear Pastor,
I can't set up the poinsettias in the sanctuary this year. Looking at poinsettias reminds me of Mrs. Smith's outrage that I ordered them from a different florist than she did when she was in charge.

The truth is, by the time the Christmas Eve service starts, I am exhausted by all the volunteer work I've done. As you know, I am mending the costumes for the Christmas pageant, baking cookies for our at-home members, and chairing the finance committee. I do the invisible labor of planning events and activities for others. The mental load is heavy. I feel so far removed from the "peace," "joy" and "goodwill" of Christmas. I want to be present to worship without feeling resentful, but I don't know how to get there from here. Is it possible to encounter God honestly in that space of frustration and depletion?

Sincerely,
Worn Thin at Christmas

Dear Worn Thin at Christmas,
Mercy. You are holding a lot. I am glad and grateful you felt able to be honest with me.
First, I want you to know I think your "no" is a holy one. Thank you for knowing your limits. It is never my intention for anyone to feel so worn down by their church commitments that they miss the joy in the everyday, let alone at Christmas!

And, yes, I do believe you can encounter God in this place of frustration and depletion. I think a lot this time of year about the shepherds. On the night Jesus was born, they weren't at worship. They were at work, keeping watch through the night, doing the ordinary work that needed doing. They didn't have to finish their work before God came near. I hope that good news rings true for you this Advent, too. You don't have to finish the costumes, do all the baking, or iron out the budget before you're allowed to experience God's presence. Christ comes to people in the midst of their ordinary lives.

Regarding Mrs. Smith and the poinsettias, I am so sorry that happened. I hadn't realized she reacted so strongly. It can be hard to let go of a role you've held for many years, especially when there is grief and change underneath it. That doesn't excuse her response, but I hope it helps to know that her anger was likely about more than the florist.

I am grateful for your steady leadership. I think it's time for you and me to meet and talk about ways the committee members can share that load. In the meantime, know that I see you, and the work you've done matters. My prayer is that somewhere in the midst of it all, you will be able to pause, sense and enjoy the truth that Christ is already present with you.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Elizabeth

Day 7

"Affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame..." Romans 5:3-5

Dear Pastor,
I've been struggling to connect the themes of Advent with the reality of the world around me. The world feels unstable right now. Everywhere I look, there is conflict, uncertainty, and fear. It's hard not to feel anxious about the future.

It's easy to believe we are living in the end times, with wars and disasters happening all around us. But it's hard to see how these things will lead to Christ's coming and bringing peace. When we talk about peace, what kind of peace do we mean?

I want to believe that this season has something real to offer, something that can meet the weight of the world as it is. What kind of hope is strong enough to hold in a time like this?

Sincerely,
Looking for Something Real

Dear Looking for Something Real,
I appreciate your struggle to connect with the themes of Advent amid the conflict, uncertainty and fear that are so present in the world. Virtues of peace, hope, joy and love that we declare as we light candles on the Advent wreath can feel as elusive as a mythical small town in a Hallmark Christmas movie — where, one minute before the hour, the big city woman and small town man kiss with a promise to live happily ever after.

Yet the Good News of Advent and Christmas is not that Christ comes to fulfill our nostalgic fantasies of the perfect Christmas — the best relationship, the sought after gift and the abundant table surrounded by family and friends. No, Christ comes amid loss, estrangement, divorce, or relocation. Christ comes in the midst of a difficult job, a dream deferred or a betrayal by a friend. Christ comes sometimes when we are just plain lost amid injustice, disillusionment and fear.

The apostle Paul writes, "Affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame" This Advent, may we remember that while loss and pain and grief may change us, they do not have to destroy us. They just might help us see the only hope we really need: a child born not in a palace but into a manger.

God bless you,
Pastor Matt Rich

Week 2: Peace
Reordering life and relationships

Week 2 Prayer

God of peace,
In the middle of competing expectations, quiet our hearts.
Where relationships are strained, give us wisdom. Where boundaries are needed, give us courage. Where love feels costly, give us grace.
Reorder our lives so that we may live not by pressure, but by your peace.
Amen.

Day 8

"Choose this day whom you will serve . . . we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15

Dear Pastor,
I find myself feeling pulled in two directions every Christmas Eve, and I'm not sure how to be fully present at the family dinner and at worship.

Attending church that night feels deeply important to me. There's something about gathering for worship, hearing the story again, singing together and lighting candles that feels like the center of the whole season. At the same time, Christmas Eve is when my extended family gathers. It's one of the few times everyone is together, and I don't want to miss it. The only thing the grandparents want for Christmas is to be with everyone and take a big family photo. It seems like a simple request, but it's a challenge for me to get there to take the photo and then get to church on time. We are the only family at this gathering that goes to church on Christmas Eve.

What does it mean to prioritize faith here? Does it mean always choosing church over family? Or is there room for flexibility?

Sincerely,
Pulled in Two Directions

Dear Pulled in Two Directions,
The "center of the whole season" first showed up not as a great leader in a holy Temple but as a babe lying in a small town's manger alongside two peasant parents. Which is to say: Love arrived in the vulnerable. And I sense one reason we so cherish those Christmas Eve services is because we are deeply moved by the vulnerability of love's way and love's presence.

None of that, of course, solves your dilemma. It simply invites this reflect: No matter where we show up, the very best way to honor this season is to love with a vulnerable love. What if you go to church this year and miss the photo? What would it look like to honor your family anyway — in the honest words you share about your decision or some alternate gesture that communicates your love? Or what if you join the family photo and forgo church this year? What would it look like to worship God in a more vulnerable way than in past years: an offering done before, during or after the family gathers?

Years ago, a terrible snowstorm canceled our local Christmas Eve services and took out electricity for an hour. With hot chocolate, freshly baked cookies and a few lit candles, a motley mix of my family gathered in my mom's small living room. Some were active churchgoers, and some were not. We went around the circle and each offered a word about something we were thankful for. My uncle read from Luke, chapter 2. I strummed "Silent Night" on the guitar, and we sang the first verse twice because it was the only one we all remembered. Each person then opened a gift. No one took a photo that night, but I promise, the evening is stuck in my memory like a photo.

Following love's way,
Pastor Bobby

Day 9

"Recite them to your children. . . . Write them on the doorposts of your house." Deuteronomy 6:7, 9

Dear Pastor,
My spouse and I have been talking about our Christmas traditions, and I've realized most of what we do is simply repeating what we grew up with. I want to create traditions that actually reflect our faith, not just our habits. But I'm hesitant to disrupt something that already works. Traditions carry emotional weight, and changing them feels risky. At the same time, I don't want to confuse familiarity with meaning.

How do we discern which traditions are worth keeping and which ones we need to reimagine? How do we do that without losing the joy that's already there?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Intentional

Dear Trying to Be Intentional,
Tradition is both a gift and an invitation. It roots us in the love, wisdom and sacrifices of those before us while inviting each generation to carry that legacy forward. The question is not simply "Should we keep this tradition?" but "How does it help us tell the story of God's faithfulness?"

Among the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast, generations have told stories of Ananse the Spider, clever and sometimes mischievous. Stories of Ananse have carried wisdom across generations — and eventually across the Atlantic with enslaved Africans. They remind us that traditions are vessels of memory, identity and hope. Deuteronomy, chapter 6, offers a similar charge. Faith belongs in the rhythms of everyday life. Around tables, through recipes and in prayers, songs, stories and celebrations, we inherit ways to remember who we are and whose we are.

But inheritance does not require imitation. As we grow and learn, we can create traditions that reflect who we are now and what we know now. Tradition and innovation need not be enemies; at their best, they enrich one another.

Perhaps the old wedding guidance offers a helpful framework: that is, something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Keep something old that roots you. Create something new that reflects where God is leading. Borrow something beautiful from another generation or culture, with gratitude and respect. And let something blue make room for the tenderness, longing and complexity that accompany every meaningful celebration.

The Akan wisdom of *sankofa* teaches us to "go back and fetch it." We honor the past not by living in it but by learning from it. So create boldly. Celebrate intentionally. Tell the stories. Write new prayers. Build traditions worth inheriting. And when someone asks, "Why do we do this?" may your answer point toward God's faithfulness from generation to generation!

With ancestral wisdom and Advent hope,
Pastor Winterbourne

Day 10

"Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together." Colossians 3:14

Dear Pastor,
This will be our third Christmas as a blended family, and our only shared tradition is matching pajamas. One set of our kids is used to regular weekly church attendance, and the other set has only attended church sporadically and never on Christmas Eve. At home, one set of kids is used to lighting the Advent candles and reading Scripture before dinner, and the other is used to a candy-filled Advent calendar that they open after dinner. So now we do both.

It feels like we are layering one set of expectations on top of the other. Big decisions like going to church and small decisions like candy-filled Advent calendars can feel loaded. What does it look like to create a shared life of faith in a family where not everyone starts from the same place? How do we intentionally cultivate meaning that we will grow into together?

Sincerely,
Trying to Hold It Together

Dear Trying to Hold It Together,
Kudos to you for being sensitive to the needs and traditions of your kids. It can be tricky to bring two families together and to navigate the rhythms and traditions they are used to. Your care and consideration of their feelings is the right place to start. I'm glad to hear everyone agrees on the PJs tradition, at least! You have found some common ground there. And there's nothing more wholesome and adorable than kids in matching jammies.

It might be helpful to call a family meeting — for the important purpose of unveiling the family Christmas pajamas, of course, and also for talking through the rest of your Advent plans. If the kids feel they're part of the planning process, they might come up with some decisions or alternatives together. Who knows? This approach could be a good way to model discussion, respect and shared decision making. You're creating a shared life together, and that takes time.

You aren't the first family to discover that different people have different ideas about how things should be done. The church is a blended family, too, in some respects. We don't always agree. We don't always like change. Sometimes we hold too tightly to traditions that have given us comfort and meaning. That's where Paul's encouragement to "clothe yourself in love" is so helpful. Love doesn't mean that we all have to agree. It means that we approach one another with patience, kindness, humility and a willingness to listen.

At Advent, we celebrate that God comes among us and makes something new — not by erasing what came before, but by making us into something we couldn't have imagined on our own.

You're doing great, my friend. Keep putting on that love each morning. You may not be holding it all together perfectly, but you're learning how to hold it together in love.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Elizabeth

Day 11

"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Romans 12:18

Dear Pastor,
I've been thinking about whether to reconnect with my family this Christmas. We've grown distant because of political disagreements that became deeply personal. What started as conversations turned into arguments and eventually silence. I haven't seen them since the Fourth of July family picnic. Part of me misses them. Another part feels guarded. I don't want to pretend everything is fine. But I also don't want this distance to become permanent.

What does reconciliation look like when we still fundamentally disagree? Is it possible to be in a relationship without resolving everything?

Sincerely,
Cautiously Hopeful

Dear Cautiously Hopeful,
It is hard to know how to be in community with people when we disagree, and it is even more difficult when those we disagree with are our family.

In the spirit of Advent as a time of preparation and hope, I recommend that you talk with your family ahead of time, or at least communicate via email or text, to plan together how you want Christmas to go. Ask for what you need: that those topics you disagree about not be addressed, that Christmas be focused on the gifts of the holiday. Ask that the family focus on the beauty of the story of Christ being born, on the time spent together and on sharing hospitality and your specific family traditions. Perhaps even add a schedule and let them know that you will be there for a few hours instead of the whole day, so that you limit how much time there is for conversation to wander into areas that might lead to further hurt and distance.

Family gatherings can be times when we set clear expectations of how things will go, even if they have not gone that way of things previously. Let your family know that you ask this so that you can feel safe and hopeful in your relationships on Christmas and so that your love for one another can be the primary thing you all experience. And if they cannot join you in that hope, perhaps prepare them and yourself for what it will be like if you are not with them, and find a way to honor your family's Christmas traditions on your own. Remind your family and yourself that we can always love and pray for one another, even when we don't spend time together.

In Advent Hope,
Pastor Jessica

Day 12

"Unless you change and become like children ..." Matthew 18:3

Dear Pastor,
This is the first Christmas when my kids no longer believe in Santa, and I didn't expect it to feel like such a loss. Christmas morning will be quieter. The kids now sleep later. They will still enjoy the gifts and say thank you, but something has shifted. The anticipation, the surprise and the wonder seem different, like we have lost something magical. I wonder if what we are missing is Santa or something deeper that I don't know how to name or nurture now that the kids are older.

Is there a way to grow into a deeper wonder that doesn't depend on childhood imagination but still feels alive and meaningful?

Sincerely,
Missing the Wonder

Dear Wonder,
Lots of us yearn for the magical anticipation that filled our childhood Christmases. My brother and I left a plate of cookies and listened for reindeer and tried earnestly to figure out the chimney travel system. And we did all that well past the point when we knew that belief and make-believe were two different things entirely.

But maybe they're not. A jolly man in a red suit traveling the world in one night, flying reindeer, elves in a toyshop and all the rest — it's all impossible. That's part of its magic. It suspends the reality around us and invites us to imagine the world through the lens of "what if."

At one time, the idea that the Creator of the Stars of Night would come to dwell not just on earth, but in a human body, was so far beyond impossible that we couldn't have imagined it as human beings. But Christmas – the Incarnation – changed that. It's not magic. It's better than magic. It invites us to imagine the world through the lens of "what if," but in a way that is more about peace and justice, about all that's wrong being made right. It's the promise that the world is about to turn.

I imagine that part of what made Christmas magical for you as a parent was watching your children experience it. What if all of you now create little moments of "what if" for someone else? Not abstractly, either; part of the miracle of Christmas is God becoming tangible. What tangible signs of presence might you share with your neighborhood? Their classmates or your colleagues? In childhood, we don't just believe something amazing happens. We believe something amazing happens and we are directly, personally involved in it. Santa comes to us.

Thanks be to God – literally – love always comes to us. Make that awareness of Christ with us tangible to others, and Christmas will always be magical.

With wonder and joy,
Pastor Jenny

Day 13

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:21

Dear Pastor,
I've been feeling uneasy about how much Christmas revolves around buying more: more gifts, more decorations, more ugly Christmas sweaters. Even when I try to keep things simple, I feel pulled into the same patterns of equating joy with more over-the-top spending to make each year more spectacular than the last. I don't want to reject the joy of giving but I don't want to participate uncritically either.

How do we celebrate fully and live simply? Or does choosing simplicity mean stepping away from some of the festivities? How can we practice generosity in a way that aligns with our faith?

Sincerely,
Trying to Live Differently

Dear TTLD,
I hear you. I'm stressed and exhausted just thinking about all of the time, money, and energy it takes to celebrate what is now a *trillion-dollar holiday season* in the US!

Jesus had a lot to say about our relationship with money. Spending and budgets reflect our values and priorities, and it's helpful to take an honest look at our habits to see if they align with our faith. Jesus also connected consumerism with heightened anxiety. How much stress do we create for ourselves in pursuing the "best Christmas ever"? If we look at what most stresses us out — money, time, expectations — we will see where to scale back. It's okay to step away from some festivities and discontinue certain traditions.

Thankfully, we have many ways to practice generosity, hospitality, and joyfulness at little to no cost. My kids and I have a tradition of placing four gifts under the tree: a want, a need, something to wear, and something to read. We've also enjoyed going to our favorite thrift stores with a set budget to shop for gifts. Handmade, repurposed, and regifted items can be given from the heart for free. Within a budget, gifts of experiences, time together, or charitable donations can be meaningful and lasting.

This shift can feel like we're disappointing others or unable to participate fully in the season's festivities. Before the season is in full swing, let people know you intend to celebrate differently this year. You can adjust expectations and give them permission to do the same. At the end of the day, give yourself and others grace as you make your way through the season. Christ will still be born, bringing hope, peace, joy and love — and there is no greater gift!

Simply,
Pastor Stephanie

Day 14

"God loves a cheerful giver." 2 Corinthians 9:7

Dear Pastor,
As a younger church leader, I've noticed that every Christmas, people become incredibly generous. It's beautiful, but it doesn't seem to last. By January, much of that energy fades. It makes me wonder whether we're seeing lasting transformation or just seasonal emotion. Are we as church leaders unintentionally reinforcing this pattern by asking people to contribute to charity along with their gift giving during Advent and Christmas?

I'm hoping to learn from your experience about how the formation of generosity works. What practices and approaches actually cultivate generosity as a way of life, not just a moment? How do we balance the church budget without relying on a Christmas miracle?
Sincerely,

Learning to Lead

Dear Learning,
In many ways, this is "the most wonderful time of the year"! Our people can be generous, and the culture amplifies that generosity in December. As you suggest, however, sometimes the church unintentionally reinforces generosity as something seasonal and even whimsical. Lamenting the task of balancing the budget resonates with me. We are not called to balance budgets. We are called to participate in the mission of Christ. Church leaders are not curators of spreadsheets; we are, Paul writes, "stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Corinthians 4:1).

A few things I've learned along the way:

- Don't put every egg into the Christmas (or Easter) basket. Too many congregations pull out all the stops twice a year at key times when the culture says faith is important. Instead, celebrate all the seasons. Emphasize the splendor of Pentecost, and honor the dark weeks following Epiphany. Craft meaningful worship weekly using varying voices and mediums throughout the year.
- Speak with your congregants about intentional and planned giving. Highlight mission opportunities, and invite the congregation to consider intentionally funding that mission.
- Connect with givers, and celebrate the mission their faithfulness makes possible! I send quarterly personalized letters to those who make pledges or gifts. These messages celebrate all their giving has enabled by highlighting specific impacts in the congregation and community. Our financial secretary closes this letter with a list of what the specific recipient has estimated to give (if applicable) and their total given year-to-date. I add a personal note to each, thanking the givers for their generosity and faithfulness.

Invite your people to join in a year of faithfulness and generosity as together you wonder at what God does in and through you.

Gratefully,
Pastor Dave

Week 3: Joy
Meaning, practice and incarnation

Week 3 Prayer

God who comes near,
You entered our world not in power, but in vulnerability.
Help us to see you in ordinary moments, in our questions, in our grief.
Give us eyes to notice your presence and hearts open to receive your joy — not forced, but quietly given.
Amen.

Day 15

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them." Luke 2:20

Dear Pastor,
This is the first Christmas Grandma is in the retirement home. We want to include her in family celebrations. But she is agitated when she leaves the facility, and we don't want to upset her. We've decided to bring Christmas to her and use the small activity room for a family holiday party.

We were hoping you might have suggestions for how to do a brief but meaningful churchlike experience for her. We want to read Scripture and sing a couple hymns she remembers well. What text would you suggest? And do you have a nice pastoral prayer for a family setting like this?

It's also possible she will be in a difficult mood. We might need a prayer for ourselves afterwards.

Sincerely,
Giving Our Best for Grandma

Dear Giving,
Bringing Christmas to your grandmother is a gift to her and a nod to the meaning of Christmas itself. We celebrate God's love coming directly to us where we are. You've already embodied the truest meaning of the day.

It would be disingenuous of me to pretend to know her favorites, but sometimes a starting place is helpful. Here's a traditional sequence that has shaped many of my own Christmas Eve services. Take two traditional readings (Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20) and intersperse two or more familiar hymns: "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," Angels We Have Heard on High," "Joy to the World," and "Silent Night."

As a prayer for all of you, I offer words from A New Zealand Prayer Book-He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa': "Lord, it is night. The night is for stillness. Let us be in the presence of God. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be. The night is dark. Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in you. The night is quiet. Let the quietness of your peace enfold us, all dear to us, and all who have no peace. The night heralds the dawn. Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities. In your name we pray. Amen." (Used with permission)

The good news is that Christmas comes no matter what, whether our efforts go according to plan or not.

With peace that surpasses understanding,
Pastor Jenny

Day 16

"Whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . . think about these things." Philippians 4:8

Dear Pastor,
We've never really treated Santa as something to believe in literally, and that approach worked when our kids were younger. Now that they are in school, they're starting to notice that other kids experience it differently. They're asking questions — not just whether Santa is real, but why some families pretend he is for their kids.

What I'm struggling with now is how to talk about Santa in a way that honors other families' experiences without undermining them, while also staying true to how we've approached Christmas in our home. Is there a way to frame Santa as a meaningful story without sounding dismissive? How do we help our kids participate graciously with their friends who believe in Santa?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Thoughtful

Dear Trying to Be Thoughtful,
My family had a similar experience with our son. Like you, we had not promoted Santa Claus in our house but did not want to undermine the experiences and traditions of others. We told him the truth in words he'd understand at his age, and I offer them to you here:

More than 1,600 years ago, a man named St. Nicholas gave away all his wealth to children and those in need, leaving secret gifts for them and not getting any credit for his kindness. For centuries, people across many cultures and religious traditions have been inspired by his generosity to follow in his footsteps by giving gifts to others without the assurance that they will get anything in return. It is fun to have a Santa Claus character that helps so many people be anonymously generous.

We want to encourage this kind of behavior at Christmas and always! But we don't need to use the language of Santa Claus because we have an example of selfless giving in Jesus. At Christmas we are inspired to give gifts and help others not because we want to make it onto Santa Claus's "nice list" but because we are happy and grateful for the generous gift that God gave us all when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The best gift is love. On Christmas, we celebrate that God loves us so much that God came to us in the flesh of Jesus, so that we would know that God loves us no matter what, without expecting anything in return.

Our faith can inspire others to live a life that is generous and kind. We can find some special ways to give gifts without getting anything in return as a family!

One generous act is to respect the differences of others' way of celebrating the season and to allow parents in other families to teach their children about the joy of giving using the words and ideas that feel best to them.

With gratitude for your thoughtful hopes and efforts,
Pastor Heather

Day 17

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" Psalm 139:7

Dear Pastor,
Our kids have started asking about Elf on the Shelf, and I feel uneasy about having an "elf" monitor them and report to Santa. The idea of being watched, evaluated and either rewarded or punished doesn't sit right with me.

What complicates my discomfort is how this custom overlaps with what we teach about God. We say God is with us, present and loving. That feels very different from being constantly monitored and judged by a toy. But I'm not sure how to explain that difference in a way my kids can understand. How do we navigate this? And how do we talk about God's presence in a way that is clearly rooted in love?

Sincerely,
Trying to Be Intentional

Dear Trying,
I want to start by naming how beautiful it is that you're taking this so seriously. Your child's understanding of God at this tender age is important and your instinct to protect it is spot on.

You do not have to participate in every Christmas tradition. When my own kids were little, we never participated in the Elf on the Shelf. We were very up front with our kids that the Santa myth is a lovely story, but Santa is not a real person. My kids' Christmases were no less special; they had many church and family traditions to find wonder in.

Children can find it helpful to contrast the conditional Elf's surveillance with God's unconditional grace. The Elf watches for misbehavior to see whether we deserve gifts, but God our Creator knows us intimately. God loves, protects, and gives to us regardless of our slip-ups.

In Psalm 139:7, we don't see a guilty person trying to escape a spy watching for them to mess up. The Psalmist is expressing awe that God's comforting presence is inescapable. Our identity and worth are found in the One who is always with us, not in a "naughty or nice" behavioral evaluation.

It is perfectly okay to abandon or avoid traditions that cause stress or don't align with your faith. If you do try out the Elf on the Shelf custom, you could tell the kids it's a game of hide-and-seek to remove the disciplinary element. Or try having the Elf give the kids a "good deeds" challenge to shift the focus from presents and self to helping others.

Keep asking good questions, and remember the important thing is remembering that God's loving presence is the true magic of Advent.

Blessings,
Pastor Charissa

Day 18

"Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith . . . ?" James 2:5

Dear Pastor,
My child asked me why some kids get bigger, more expensive gifts than others. They noticed that their good friend got a few small toys, and the class bully got a Nintendo Switch. They're noticing something real. There are differences, and they aren't always fair. The kindest kids don't always receive the best gifts, and unkind kids rarely receive coal in their stocking.

I don't want my child to think their friend is hiding a sin that makes them less deserving than someone else because of what they receive. How do we talk about this honestly? How do we help our children understand generosity and compassion in the midst of inequality?

Sincerely,
Caught Off Guard

Dear Caught Off Guard,
Children may begin to notice wealth inequality among their peers for many reasons — whether it is apparent through the quantity of gifts on special occasions, the niceness of houses or clothes, or the elaborateness of vacations and other extracurricular activities. The culture around us celebrates wealth, and Christians can easily get sucked into the mentality that admires material possessions and abundant financial resources.

One of the great shortcomings of secular Christianity's Santa tradition is that it often equates receiving gifts with being good, especially for children. This messaging is rather contrary to the truth we encounter in Scripture. The biblical Christmas story itself is about how a family with few resources bears Christ into the world, and Jesus' teachings often point us toward the dignity and generosity of those who are poor.

Your child has offered you a great opportunity to push back on the messaging that equates wealth with goodness, so you can instead emphasize that love and compassion are the qualities that make us truly wealthy.

Be honest. Acknowledge that wealthy people can sometimes be mean and dishonest, while folks with few resources may be very good, hardworking people. Take stock of the family and friends close to your family. If socioeconomic diversity isn't represented there, consider how you might diversify your family's experiences of the larger world's realities. Your daily life is the easiest way to show your child that you value people by their character and kindness, not the size of their bank accounts.

Blessings to you in this Advent season!
Pastor Lindy

Day 19

"Every generous act of giving . . . is from above." James 1:17

Dear Pastor,
My child asked me why we give gifts at Christmas, and I realized I didn't have a clear answer. I started with tradition, generosity, celebration, but none of it felt complete.

Is gift giving today about us giving presents to one another to mimic the wise men presenting Jesus with gifts? Is it about reflecting God's generosity? Or has it just become something we do because of capitalism?

I want to connect this practice to our faith in a meaningful way, but I'm not sure how to explain it without oversimplifying. What are we really doing when we give gifts?

Sincerely,
Trying to Answer Well

Trying to Answer Well,
God's generosity fascinates me. I think about one of the names for God in Islam: Al-Karim, or the Generous One. Perhaps you have heard other Christians refer to God in song as "Jehovah Jireh, my provider." It is good to have confidence that God will provide, and I believe that God calls us to participate in that generosity by how we treat each other.

Scripture tells us that people look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. I lift this up to say that our intention behind gift giving matters even more than the gift. Christmas can bring up a lot of different intentions for us. Some of us feel an obligation to give a gift. Others may give because it feels good to see their child's reaction to the gift — less about the warmth of their happiness, but perhaps about the feeling of power that comes from knowing they are the reason the child is happy. Some of us are so caught in the cycle of consumption that we buy things because we like how we ourselves feel when we make a purchase. It is really easy for us to lose the plot!

With Christmas, we get a chance to model God's generosity when we let love become the reason for our giving. Can we give a gift without terms and conditions? Can our generosity be inspired by a sincere desire to see our loved ones experience joy? When we model generosity in this way, we get to participate in the limitless generosity of God: the kind of giving that spills into the lives of others and inspires them to be generous as well. There's nothing wrong with gift giving as long as we are loving and we sincerely want the best for others.

Peace,
Pastor Chris

Day 20

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect." 1 Peter 3:15-16

Dear Pastor,
I'm a college student living with a roommate who is Jewish. As the holidays approach, I want to honor my traditions while respecting theirs. I would love to put up a small Christmas tree and Nativity set, but I don't want to make them uncomfortable. I'm not even sure how to ask in a way that doesn't seem insensitive.

What does it look like to live my authentic faith but also be respectful of my roommate's need to live their own authentic faith? I think this could be an opportunity for us to learn from each other. Living with someone of another faith has made me think more intentionally about what I believe and why. And I want this experience to help me make interfaith friendships throughout my life.

Sincerely,
Learning Through Living Together

Dear LTLT,
First, I want to commend your intuition about this tricky situation. Your respectful attitude and sincere intentions reflect the "gentleness and reverence" the Scriptures call for in disciples of Christ. This approach already gives me confidence that you can (and will!) navigate this in a faithful way.

As in most situations, honesty is the best policy. "Living your authentic faith" requires being transparent about where you stand. If a Christmas tree or Nativity set is important to your expression of faith, then the most loving thing you can do – for God, self and neighbor – is to let your roommate know that. Better to communicate your needs and desires and deal with potential awkwardness than to let resentment fester in secret. If you approach your roommate with the same humility and sincerity that you display in your letter, you will come across as anything but insensitive!

This is a great opportunity to invite your roommate to share their own traditions with you. You could encourage them to put up personal decorations because your room is a shared space. If they are amenable, you could ask them to walk you through the rhythms of their holiday observances — both to satisfy your curiosity and to show that you value their faith. Above all, impress upon your roommate that your relationship with them matters more to you than the traditions themselves.

Trust that the light of Christ shines uniquely through your roommate in the fullness of who they are, which includes their religious identity. Being honest about your faith, expressing genuine curiosity in the faith of others and being eager to learn about and celebrate the goodness of faith traditions all offer the recipe for fruitful interfaith relationships. You seem well on your way to making many more!

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Gavin

Day 21

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it." John 1:5

Dear Pastor,
This will be my first Christmas without my spouse. Everything feels different. Traditions feel heavy instead of comforting.

There's an absence that I feel in every part of the season. I opened the Christmas decoration box and cried when I saw our matching stockings. Each year we went to the holiday symphony performance, but the idea of listening to the joyful music makes me feel even more alone. During the candlelight service at church, we would hold hands in the dark, and I know my pew will feel empty this year.

How will Christmas still be Christmas when so much of what made it meaningful has been taken away? What does it mean to say "God is with us" when someone I love is no longer here?

Sincerely,
Grieving This Season

Dear Grieving This Season,
Let me say I am saddened by your loss. How difficult these days must be for you. Let me also say that your question has many answers, as many as there are people who grieve. We each find our own way through the darkness, and no two paths are the same.

"God is with us" can sound hollow when all we feel is absence, not presence. It is hard to see the light that darkness supposedly cannot overcome when the darkness is so overwhelming.

Perhaps I can offer two thoughts that may help. One is that darkness need not be terrifying or even bad. The Christian mystics say that spiritual darkness can be generative, even healing. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that to find the Holy One, Moses had to enter the "cloud of thick darkness" at the top of Sinai. Maybe your darkness is the place where you will encounter the Holy One in ways you cannot now expect or even imagine.

The second thought may sound a bit esoteric, but it is of great comfort to me. The mystics teach us that within the Holy One is a radical unity: All things are one thing. That means that the things we experience as separate and separating – light and dark, life and death, being and nonbeing – are not separate but are one within the Holy One. I don't think a barrier separates the living and the dead; I think all are one within the Holy One, and nothing and no one is lost.

Perhaps this Christmas Eve, when you light your candle in the darkened sanctuary, you might think about the unity of darkness and light, of living and dying. Without the darkness, there would be no light. All things are one thing.

In unity,
Pastor Paul

Week 4: Love
Wonder, mystery and theological depth

Week 4 Prayer

God of love,
You are greater than our understanding and closer than our breath.
In the mystery of your coming, you have made yourself known — not in certainty, but in presence.
Help us to receive the gift of Christ with wonder, with humility, with love.
Amen.

Day 22

"Let all the earth keep silence before him!" Habakkuk 2:20

Dear Pastor,
I've always loved Christmas music, but I don't love the Advent hymns. "Let All Moral Flesh," especially, is so dark and depressing. I want "Go Tell It on the Mountain" to inspire us to movement.

Last week's organ postlude was so slow and sad, and I really want to leave church feeling uplifted.

Why does waiting matter? Can't we sing Christmas hymns sooner?

Our church doesn't add Christmas hymns until later. But my friend goes to the church in the next town over, and they sing Christmas music for all of December.

Sincerely,
Ready to Sing Already

Dear Ready to Sing Already,
I love church music too! It can create a mood or express sentiments that are hard to convey in words alone. There are many ways to program Advent and Christmas music, none of which are wrong or right.

Sometimes worship committees lean into a penitential feeling during Advent. Lent and Advent share the liturgical color of purple, and they can similarly share the theme of preparing for God to do something extraordinary. This preparation can include confessing sins, fasting and engaging in deep self-reflection. In Advent, we are preparing for Christ to be born anew in our hearts. For some of us, that rebirth means cleaning up what we hold in our heart to make room for what God has in store.

In other years, a worship committee might lean into the Advent themes of hope, joy, peace and love. These themes can lead to different music selections that may feel more uplifting, including traditional Christmas hymns sung during Advent.

Many churches also interpret Advent in their own way, so it makes sense that we sing different hymns. No one is right or wrong — just worshipping God in a unique way.

You could suggest that your pastor or the worship committee organize a hymn sing for the Sunday after Christmas — with your help, if you have the time and energy.

"Sing"cerely yours,
Pastor Karie

Day 23

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us." John 1:14

Dear Pastor,
I moved a lot as a kid, and my family were never really churchgoers. When I was in military service, I went to church occasionally with friends, and I read the Bible on my own. But I don't really understand all of the church year and what the symbols in the sanctuary mean.

I'm realizing that Advent, Christmas and Epiphany are actually different seasons. I figured this out mostly because we change the colors and accessories in the sanctuary. The Advent wreath candles in my church are purple, but I've been to churches where one candle is pink. Then on Christmas Eve, everything changes to white.

It's beautiful, but what does it all mean? How do these changes shape how we understand Jesus?

Sincerely,
Relearning the Calendar

Dear Relearning,
I confess I am a bit jealous. We lived in the same house my whole childhood, and I was always jealous of my friends who had lived other places. They always had mementos of different places they had called home: baseball pennants, school pictures, etc. Each told part of their story.

You can say the same about all the colors that mark the parts of the holiday season as well. Each has a story to tell. Purple reminds us that Advent is a season of humanity's longing for a sign of salvation. That season of expectation is like the blueish-purple of the night sky that waits for dawn. The pink candle is like a shooting star in that night sky. It represents hope amid our anticipation, reminding us that what we wait for is the fulfillment of God's promise — which is as sure as the sunrise. Then finally, on Christmas Eve, we change to white. Have you ever seen snow first thing in the morning? It is like a white blanket of perfect peace. For me, that is what the white at Christmas symbolizes: the perfect peace of Christ in the world.

The great thing about symbols is that they have a life of their own. The colors have traditional shared meanings in the church, but they can also have meanings for you. What do the colors say to you during the season? Perhaps the pink is less a shooting star than the first bloom in spring. Whatever they come to mean for you, I hope the colors and symbols of the season draw you in and remind you that Christmas is a promise of hope that unfolds before us year after year.

Peace,
Pastor Rob

Day 24

"There were shepherds living in the fields." Luke 2:8
"Magi from the east came." Matthew 2:1

Dear Pastor,
I've noticed that the Gospels tell the Christmas story in different ways. Matthew has wise men who follow a star; Luke talks about shepherds and angels. We combine figures from each into one scene in our Christmas pageant and in our Nativity displays.

I don't think it's a problem, but I'm trying to understand better what it means to blend the Gospel accounts. What are we communicating by blending these stories? Are we prioritizing the big picture over the details? Are we simplifying the story, or are we expressing something deeper by holding these perspectives together?

I've been rearranging my Nativity set at home and sitting with it each week to see if I feel differently about the story being communicated. I haven't had a big ah-ha moment yet.

Sincerely,
Paying Closer Attention

Dear Paying Closer Attention,
Of all the creche sets that my family sets out for the Christmas season, my favorite is possibly the smallest. You might not notice it in our living room if you don't know what to look for. It's only one piece, a single small statue, depicting the holy family crammed into a Peruvian intercity bus. It's not literal, of course. It's not meant to be literal. Nobody is making the case that the Gospels of Luke or Matthew include motorized vehicles. But just because it's not literal doesn't mean it doesn't contain truth. The craftspeople who conceived of this bus saw something true in the Christmas tale about modern migration and dislocation. They saw something of their own modern lives in this story from two thousand years ago, half a world away. So they decided to tell the story again, using the world they knew — this time in art.

They're not the first. Faithful Christians been adapting, rearranging and melding these Gospel Nativity stories for centuries. We've been splicing dialogue. We've been adding characters. In my church, the number of shepherds in the pageant varies wildly every year based not on any exegetical principle but solely on the number of willing children who are ready in costume. But this is precisely my point. The Christmas story was never just about the holy family, the shepherds and the magi. Jesus isn't born just for the people on the page. Jesus is born for everybody who reads the Good News, everybody who hears it, everybody who tells it — and when we tell it in our own words, when we adapt it for our own people, we're reminding every child of God that they have a part to play in the great cosmic pageant.

Yours,
Pastor Matt G.

Day 25

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." Psalm 24:1

Dear Pastor,
I've been thinking about traditions like Christmas trees and Chrismon trees.

Are we redeeming these traditions or simply adapting them? How do we discern what belongs in worship?

I realize we don't want Santa Claus on the sanctuary tree, but do all of the ornaments have to have religious meaning? Could we put up sparkly and colorful Christmas ornaments?

Sincerely,
Wondering About the Tree in the Sanctuary

Dear Wondering about the Tree in the Sanctuary,
Thank you for this question that shows real care for what happens in worship. Instead of redeeming or adapting decorations, I wonder if we can reframe this question. Psalm 24:1 reminds us that all creation belongs to God. And what a claim! The tree doesn't need our permission to belong to God; ornaments, Chrismons (symbols combining the words "Christ" and "monogram" and used as decorations) included, already belong to God. Our *Book of Order* echoes the psalm: "For time, space and matter belong to God," and worship is where we join this ongoing claim (W-1.020118).

And for Reformed people, if your sanctuary has only used Chrismons, that history doesn't bind you either. We are always being reformed by the Word of God! If the ornaments, in their sparkle and color, speak to the beauty of God's own creation, that is reason enough. Go for it!

Your question also made me notice something. No tree is ever decorated with just one ornament or one Chrismon. What makes a tree beautiful is clustering many of them together, each unique with its own shape and color, all under one tree. This sounds like a congregation to me! At baptism, we are all given unique gifts, and we all belong to God. And we don't do it alone! None of us is asked to be the whole tree or even the sole ornament. We bring our whole selves and gather under Christ.

So let the tree hold all of it, sparkly alongside Chrismons. This Advent, may your congregation notice the same thing about itself, that God is gathering a great many different gifts onto one tree and calling it very good.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Alex

Day 26

"In the beginning was the Word." John 1:1

Dear Pastor,
I've learned that Christmas traditions developed over time and may connect to earlier celebrations from other faiths, yet we use them in worship.

Does the origin of a tradition affect its meaning? Are we reshaping something into something new? What do we think about faith traditions that are borrowed from pagan rituals or other spiritual practices?

I'm thinking about how Christmas trees may have roots in Yule logs or pagan celebrations. I also read an article about how poinsettias were known by the Aztecs as *cuetlaxóchitl*. Is their use cultural appropriation? Does celebrating Jesus as the Light of the World have anything to do with the solstice?

Sincerely,
Trying to Understand What We've Inherited

Dear Inherited,
Certainly, all sorts of stories and traditions surround the signs and symbols of Christmas. And yes, many do originate in other traditions and early human cultures.

Like words, symbols rely on context. If you saw an apple sitting next to a Bible, you might think about creation and humanity in the garden of Eden. But what if the apple were sitting next to a book of fairy tales? Then you might be reminded of Sleeping Beauty. Or consider the bright star that heralds the birth of Christ. For the ancient Egyptians, that same bright star signaled the annual flooding of the Nile. Only with context can we really get the unique Christian meaning of shared symbols.

Some symbols at Christmas bring meaning into the Christmas story. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were odd gifts to bring a newborn, but they were just right for a king. Those symbols of royal birth, familiar across cultures, come into the story of Christ as a proclamation of his kingship. Of course, the meaning of kingship itself was redefined by Jesus' own ministry in the world!

Shared symbols can bring richness to our stories while reminding us that we live in a wondrously diverse world. You are right that we need to be mindful of appropriation and take great care in how we use symbols held in common with other traditions. The next time you see a poinsettia – that winter plant that was once a sign of the sun and warriors but now reminds us of the season of the Christ Child – why not give a little word of thanks to God that such a simple plant has brought meaning to people as diverse as the Aztecs and the Presbyterians!

Peace,
Pastor Rob

Day 27

"He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:17

Dear Pastor,
I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around Jesus' immortality. It's hard to think about someone eternal entering a particular time in history.

We say Jesus is eternal, yet we celebrate his birth. What was Jesus doing before he was born? How was he active in creation? And how did he stay connected with the Trinity while he was in a human body? To be human, did he have to give up some of that connection?

I know this may be a mystery, but I want to understand how to think about it.

Sincerely,
Trying to Understand the Mystery

Dear Trying,
Mystery is at the heart of faith, yet we humans do not always do well with mystery.

Consider the mystery of eternity. We do our living and dying on a temporal plane, so we believe eternity to be beyond our comprehension by definition. Even if we try to make sense of eternity, from our human perspective we find ourselves imagining eternity as time that has no end.

The doctrine of the Trinity invites us to consider eternity from the perspective of God, in whom all things – past, present and future – hold together. The late Frederick Buechner put it this way: "Eternity is not endless time or the opposite of time. It is the essence of time. If you spin a pinwheel fast enough, then all its colors blend into a single color – white – which is the essence of all the colors of the spectrum combined. If you spin time fast enough, then time-past, time-present, and time-to-come all blend into a single timelessness or eternity, which is the essence of all times combined."(Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*)

Yet Buechner's last sentence contradicts his first. God and eternity are the opposite of timelessness. Rather, God has all the time in the world (for us!). To borrow a movie title, God is "everything, everywhere, all at once!"

This is how God can be present at creation and still creating now; how Christ, the Word of God, can be present at creation yet also enter time as Jesus; and how the Spirit of God can brood over the deep in the beginning and, in the fullness of time, gather a disparate group of mortals to be Christ's church.

You see, I can't really explain eternity. I can only encounter Christ, who entered time to reveal eternity. Perhaps following Jesus is the best way to live with mystery.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Baron

Day 28

"[Nothing] . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God." Romans 8:39

Dear Pastor,
I'm struggling with my seasonal depression. Yes, I am seeing my therapist and taking care of myself. But I'm struggling to read, and I can't concentrate enough to do the Advent devotions this year. I need something quick that I can do when I feel overwhelmed.

I was hoping you might be able to give me one small passage or prayer that I can use throughout Advent. I keep coming back to something simple. Where is God in all of this? In the stress, the grief, the waiting, where is God actually present?

I want something real. Something that I can hold onto this season.

Sincerely,
Searching for Assurance

Dear Searching for Assurance,
When you are feeling overwhelmed I wonder if you might hold onto a breath prayer. Perhaps as you breathe in, say, "Angels announce," and then as you breathe out, say "Good News of great joy."

As you concentrate on your breathing and begin to experience the Good News of great joy the angels shared with the shepherds, I wonder if you might open your hands to receive as a gift a particular grace: the truth that you do not need to hold onto God. The gift of Advent and Christmas is that God comes down to hold onto us.

When I am overwhelmed and need to remember that I am embraced by God's love, I turn to the apostle Paul's declaration in the eighth chapter of Romans. He begins with one of the strongest words in Greek: *peitho*. It means trust, confidence, reliance, certainty. If one is certain of something, then nothing can undermine that faith. It is the rock upon which you build your life and the idea against which you judge everything else. Paul declares, "I am convinced that [nothing] . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God loves us and neither depression nor stress, not grief or waiting, can ever separate us from God's love. God comes down to hold onto us.

You are in my prayers, and I trust that a church that loves you is holding you in their prayers, too.

God bless you,
Pastor Matt R.

Closing letter from a pastor

Dear Friends,
I have read your letters with your questions, your grief, your longing. I have prayed for wisdom and compassion so that I can answer you with the love of Jesus.

What I want you to know is this: You are not outside the Jesus story. God has come not into perfect lives, but into real ones. Not into ideal circumstances, but into this world as it is.

Nothing – not exhaustion, not doubt, not conflict, not grief – can separate you from the love of God.

This is the promise of Advent: God is with us. And loves us just the way we are.

Love,
Pastor Karie

Contributors



Chris Burton

The Rev. Chris Burton, born and educated in Brooklyn, is the sole proprietor of an antiracist consulting agency called Di Baddest Consulting. He serves as an ambassador for the Lupus Foundation of America, social justice fellow for The Memorial Foundation and associate pastor of Hitchcock Presbyterian Church in Scarsdale, New York.



Dave Carver

The Rev. Dave Carver has been an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since 1990. Dave has had the luxury of deep rootedness in a particular cid:f_mv03ma8s3 community (as pastor of the First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, since 1993) as well as spectacular travel adventures, having visited all 50 states and all seven continents. Both Dave and his wife, Sharon, grew up in Wilmington, Delaware; they have one adult child and two grandchildren. In his free time, Dave enjoys fishing, gardening, baking and storytelling.



Karie Charlton

The Rev. Karie Charlton is a PC(USA) pastor, writer and menstrual health advocate in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. You can find more of her writing in her blog, periodpastor.com, or by following her on Facebook and Instagram: @ periodpastor.



Jessica Dixon

The Rev. Jessica Dixon is a career transitional pastor and lifelong Presbyterian serving in New Jersey. Born and raised in the Denver area of Colorado, she attended St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. She enjoys hikes with her dog, pottery throwing, knitting and crochet, Broadway shows and reading. She loves advocating for her queer siblings in the church and the world and hopes her work can make the world a better place for the whole diversity of those God loves.



Alex Evangelista

The Rev. Alex Evangelista is pursuing a DMin at Columbia Theological Seminary, focused on the effectiveness of antiracism policies in Matthew 25 Presbyteries.



Matt Gaventa

The Rev. Matt Gaventa is the senior pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, where he lives with his wife, Sarah, and son, Charlie. In his spare time, he hunts for tacos, heist movies, cornbread recipes and hiking trails.



Winterbourne Harrison-Jones

The Rev. Dr. Winterbourne Harrison-Jones serves as senior pastor of the historic Witherspoon Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, among the nation's oldest African American Presbyterian congregations, bringing a rich blend of theological insight, administrative leadership and creative passion that weaves ministry, culture and formation into sources of reflection, connection and liberation.



Mike Holohan

The Rev. Mike Holohan is the associate pastor for missions and campus ministry at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Previously, he was the co-pastor of the Commonwealth of Oakland new worshipping community. When he's not working, Mike enjoys running, biking, reading, cooking, playing video games, learning to play guitar and yelling about the government. His Dungeons & Dragons character is a level 7 elf druid.



Paul Hooker

The Rev. Paul Hooker is a retired Presbyterian pastor, presbytery executive and professor. He has written extensively in the fields of Hebrew Bible and Presbyterian polity and is the author of three volumes of poetry. He lives in northeast Georgia with his wife, Pat, near enough to their children and grandchildren to see them regularly but far enough to avoid being a nuisance. He loves singing and playing jazz bass and has been found standing in shallow streams with a fly rod in hand.



Charissa Howe

The Rev. Dr. Charissa Clark Howe serves as the pastor of the Sixth Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has a background in missional leadership, focusing on trauma theology. Charissa recently finished her International Coaching Federation training and enjoys coaching other ministers and leaders. She and her husband have parented several biological and foster children for varying amounts of time and recently bought a bigger house to fit their large family, massive game nights, silly themed parties and their growing menagerie of rescued dogs and cats.



Bobby Hulme-Lippert

The Rev. Dr. Bobby Hulme-Lippert is an ordained PC(USA) minister, former U.S. Army chaplain and now a leadership coach and keynote speaker. He's the author of Small Stories About Big Things and lives in Oak Park, Illinois, with his wife and two children.



Elizabeth N. H. Link

The Rev. Elizabeth N. H. Link is the executive pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia. She is a graduate of Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina, and Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. Elizabeth lives with her husband, Chris, their five-year-old daughter and a dog named Scout.



Robert Lowry

The Rev. Rob Lowry is lead pastor of Westover Hills Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, a cooperative ministry that includes two 1001 New Worshipping Communities and an Inclusive Catholic Church congregation. Rob is active in advocating for the queer and immigrant communities in Little Rock.



Jenny McDevitt

The Rev. Jenny McDevitt is senior pastor and head of staff at Shandon Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina: a large, vibrant congregation that welcomes and affirms all God's children. She reads voraciously, runs slowly but stubbornly, drinks too much coffee and, most days, is certain she has the best job in the world.



Barron Mullis

The Rev. Dr. Baron Mullis serves as the 17th pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Outside church, he enjoys painting, playing the piano, eating dinner with his spouse and playing with their beagles.



Matt Rich

The Rev. Matthew A. Rich is a husband, father of three, author and, by the grace of God, the pastor/head of staff of Unity Presbyterian Church in Fort Mill, South Carolina.



Austin Crenshaw Shelly

The Rev. Austin Crenshaw Shelly serves as senior pastor alongside the people who are Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Waiting has never been her forte, yet Advent remains one of her favorite seasons of the liturgical year, what with its inherent mystery, tension and love.



Heather Schoenewolf

The Rev. Heather Schoenewolf has been serving as a minister of Word and Sacrament for 18 years. She currently serves as pastor at Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with her husband and son.



Stephanie Sorge

The Rev. Stephanie Sorge is the pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia.



Laura Strauss

The Rev. Dr. Laura Strauss is the pastor of Sunset Hills United Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She loves exploring the places where faith meets the beautiful, complicated realities of ordinary life. You can often find her hiking with her husband and son or else curled in a chair with a good book.



Lindy Vogado

The Rev. Lindy Vogado is associate pastor for belonging and outreach at Second Presbyterian Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. A native of East Tennessee, she now lives in Arkansas with her husband and their two young children.



Gavin Walton

The Rev. Dr. Gavin B. J. Walton is the pastor of Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh's historic Hill District. Gavin is the co-organizer of an antiracist, interfaith leaders' group in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area. This group was created out of the 2020 Oakland Vigil for Black Lives, which Gavin also co-organized; it consists of ministerial and nonministerial leaders who seek to support one another in their antiracism work in their respective congregations and communities.