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12/01/2019 | Monthly Topic

Why we celebrate four weeks in Advent

by *Emily Anne Carson*

During Advent, we welcome the illuminating power of the light of Christ. Jesus’ presence reveals God’s infinite compassion even in life’s greatest challenges. The four weeks of Advent provide a special season in which to reflect upon the impact of the Light in all areas of life – especially in the difficulties we face.


I misunderstood the mechanics and meanings of light for most of my life. It’s referenced in many popular idioms: “light of your life,” “seen the light” and “all sweetness and light” to name just a few. Jesus talks about the light, too. He says, “I am the light of the world” and “Let your light shine.”

For years, I falsely believed that embracing the light was about being positive, finding the silver lining, and keeping my chin up. I was wrong. Shining the light isn’t about forcing a plastered smile onto my face; instead, it’s about developing the courage to reveal what’s real and empowering others to do the same.

The light isn’t especially noteworthy all on its own; it’s amazing because of the way it illuminates everything around it.

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Sit in a dark room for a while. Then light a small candle. It is miraculous the way even a small source of radiance brings spaces into clearer view. This is what Jesus does. This is what Jesus calls us into. His Light.

Jesus doesn't force people to be smiling sunshine. Instead, he invites people to be forces of illumination – revealing what's true. Jesus brings reality into clearer view and gives us courage to recognize it, celebrate what's sacred, heal what's broken and keep journeying.

As we head into the four weeks of the season of Advent, we have the opportunity to acknowledge the illuminating power of the Light. Life's challenges illuminate uniquely. In the midst of them, the light shines and we enter into a new relationship with reality even when it's hard. Christ, the eternally shining light, is present with us always.

I'm paying close attention this year to the way Jesus enters into loss, failure, disruption and change. His presence makes all things possible. Through him, even deep challenge holds within it the potential for illumination and transformation.

Nearly a decade ago, I was diagnosed with an autoimmune condition called immune thrombocytopenic purpura (ITP). My body eats its own platelets for no obvious reason. In jest, I call it my unfortunate "bonus feature" – an internal, insatiable appetite for the part of blood that makes clotting possible.

Over the past decade, the immediacy of my medical needs has shifted. There were years early on that involved multiple, multi-day hospital stays and blood transfusions. Sometimes it was really scary; I wondered if I'd bleed to death. These days, my condition is very stable and involves just a weekly blood test and weekly bone marrow stimulating injection to help my body make extra platelets.

This experience has been irritatingly illuminating. Jesus is like that sometimes. We don't necessarily want to find Him inviting us into a deeper relationship with the Truth of the Universe in the midst of challenge and sorrow, and yet there he is. Always. Ever-shining, ever-loving, ever-near.

My medical condition is invisible. I like it that way. I like to pretend it doesn't affect me or disrupt my life. But it does. I still go to the hospital twice a week every week. My husband and I are uncertain whether it will ever be physically safe for me to carry children. As the years pass, this weighs more heavily on my mind than I ever express aloud. As we step closer to Advent, I feel God's Spirit calling me to let the light shine into and onto this space of pain.

One of the healing gifts of the Light is that it makes visible what is often otherwise invisible in all our lives. Fear. Uncertainty. Insecurity. These are real, normal human emotional experiences. In naming them and facing them, deep healing and learning become possible.

What if, this Advent season, we allowed the light of Christ to shine into what's real? What if in the midst of challenges – the old ones we've carried for decades and the new ones we encounter each

day – we make space for the Light to illuminate? What if we step into this season without a hefty holiday agenda and instead just work on breathing in and out and opening up to whatever kinds of illumination would lead to our individual and collective healing?

There's an expression I like: to see something in a new light. This Advent, may Jesus open our hearts to recognize life anew. May we sit with what's real, and may it give us the wisdom to live more deeply and authentically. God grant us the courage to welcome the Light.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you ever experienced a challenge that was irritatingly illuminating? Where was God in the midst of it? What did you learn/are you learning?
2. What types of support and spiritual practices give you the courage to turn toward the Light?
3. What are your hopes and intentions for this Advent season?

Closing prayer:

God who Illuminates, grant us the courage to live in right relationship with reality. When we are tempted to live in fear and pain and uncertainty, you shine your Light of infinite compassion upon us. This Advent, surround us with people and experiences that illuminate your Truth in our midst. In the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.



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Watching and waiting to welcome the Light

by *Emily Anne Carson*

Advent is a season of illumination. We watch and wait to welcome the Light. The Light of Christ empowers us to see the world around us in new and braver ways.

The Light radiates in such a way that we recognize reality without fear. It isn't just the overtly happy parts of life that reveal God's nearness; the challenges do, too. During this month of Advent, we specifically honor the way that the Light of Christ shines in the midst of life's difficulties. For December's faith reflection, we walk alongside four people from the New Testament as they navigate loss, failure, disruption and change.

Loss: Thomas

Thomas was a disciple. He followed Jesus faithfully. He's mentioned a few times by name in the New Testament. In the 20th chapter of John, we get a glimpse into how Thomas navigated loss and how the Light of Christ was shining in the midst of the challenges Thomas faced.

After the crucifixion, the Gospel of John mentions that the disciples gathered together. At that point, they didn't know he'd been raised from the dead. Jesus showed up at their meeting, and they were amazed! Thomas didn't go to that gathering, and we don't hear why. We can hypothesize, though. Thomas was dealing with the greatest loss of his life; the murder of his dear teacher and friend, Jesus. Maybe he didn't want to get out of bed. Maybe he just wanted to hide away under the covers.

Interestingly, the next week, Thomas decided to show up at the gathering. Jesus showed up again, too. Jesus brought a message of peace. Thomas' faith was restored.

One of the challenges we face in this earthly life is loss, and those losses take many forms. Losses of loved ones and jobs and hoped-for futures. In the midst of loss, the Light enters in: sometimes in the form of dear friends who sit with us even in despair. As we navigate loss, the Light remains a beacon of hope while also giving us space to feel what we actually feel.

Failure: Peter

Peter was also a disciple of Jesus. He, too, followed faithfully. He encountered the Light of Christ in the midst of challenge. The difficulty Peter faced was failure.

Just prior to the crucifixion, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times. At the time, Peter thought it was impossible. He couldn't imagine failing in that way. And yet, that's exactly what happened. Peter did deny his relationship with Jesus to three different strangers.

After the resurrection, Jesus reached out to Peter with love and gave him the chance to mend what had been broken. In the book of Acts, we read many stories of Peter's commitment to sharing the good news of Christ near and far! Peter's encounter with the Light in the midst of failure helped him heal and move forward.

We, too, make mistakes. Sometimes they're small and sometimes they're gigantic. Sometimes they're public and everyone knows, and other times they're private and we carry them with us our whole lives.


In Peter, we witness the ways Jesus illuminates in the midst of failure. As we face our mistakes and regrets, Jesus lovingly invites us to remain in real relationship with Him. We don't have to pretend or hide. Instead, we can name what's real and true, and we can heal.

Disruption: Mary

Over the course of a lifetime, we experience many disruptions. To disrupt is to cause disorder, turmoil or interruption. Routines shift in unexpected ways. Medical diagnoses catch us off-guard. Employment opportunities come and go.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had a close relationship with disruption. From early on in her life, she knew what it meant to experience a major change of plans. She was engaged. She had a vision for her life. And then an angel showed up with an invitation into disruption. Mary was told she'd have a child, and that child would be God's son. As Jesus grew up, the turmoil for Mary continued all the way to the cross.

In the midst of the many disruptions that Mary faced as the mother of Jesus, the Light continued to shine. Her openness to God's invitation is revealed in her words upon hearing the angel's news in Luke, chapter 1. Mary says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."



Disruptions are a part of life. We can't predict them or avoid them. But we can trust in a God who draws near to us in the midst of the realities we don't anticipate. The Light reveals unimagined possibilities as we navigate the difficulties of disruption.

Change: Saul/Paul

Change is the constant state of the universe. People often say, "I don't like change." But regardless of whether we like it, it's a guarantee. The Light of Christ illuminates in special ways in the face of change.

In the book of Acts, we encounter a man named Saul. Saul thought he had it all figured out. He was a devout religious person, and he believed fiercely that early Christians were heretics. He wanted to get rid of them. Then he experienced a complete and utter change of heart. He saw a light and heard the voice of Jesus say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

That encounter with the True Light changed Saul forever. He was later called Paul. He became a dedicated proclaimer of the good news of Jesus. The Light shined in the midst of the changes Saul/Paul faced as he transformed from tormenter to defender.

Advent is a season in which we anticipate the Light. Jesus enters into every aspect of life, and we trust that He is especially near in the midst of challenges. In loss, failure, disruption and change, Jesus illuminates. His presence gives us the courage to navigate the winding roads of this life knowing that we never travel alone.

Discussion questions:

1. In this faith reflection, we encounter Thomas, Peter, Mary and Paul. Which story resonates with you today?
2. Share about a time you experienced loss, failure, disruption and/or change? Where did you witness the Light in the midst of that season?
3. What spiritual practices are most meaningful to you during the four weeks of Advent? How do you make intentional space for the Light?

Closing prayer:

Illuminating Christ, draw near to us throughout this Advent season. Empower us to

recognize your presence in the midst of the difficulties we face. As we reflect upon the stories of Thomas, Peter, Mary and Paul, remind us of the ways you walk with us as well. Thank you for your presence in all of life, even and especially the challenges. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Emily Carson is a curator of curiosity. She loves exploring new hiking trails and coffee shops with her husband, Justin, and their Redbone Coonhound, Finn. She is a pastor and currently serves as an Assistant to the Bishop & the Director for Evangelical Mission in the Southeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA. Find Emily on Instagram at @emilyannecarson.



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Awaiting Immanuel: Four weeks of Advent devotions

by Rebecca Boardman

December holds the darkest of days. For some, this is fearful. Others wrap every surface with artificial lights to have more light around them. For us, let it be a gentle reminder to slow our rhythm and listen to the quiet of creation around us. God speaks in darkness, too.

In this study, we will reflect on Isaiah's prophecy and pay special attention to how God is speaking to us through the Mountains, Tree (stumps) and the Desert. These earthly metaphors culminate with a final prophecy about Immanuel, the ultimate creation. After each devotion, I invite you to journal the guiding questions and enjoy an activity based on the theme of the week.

Come, let Creation guide us deeper into Advent.

Week 1: December 1-7, 2019

Keep awake. . . or you may miss the Mountain

Isaiah 2:2-3

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us thy ways and that we may walk in God's paths."

When you visualize mountains, what descriptors come to mind? Strength and majesty are the first words on my lips. The allure of mountain ranges draw millions of visitors to our National Parks and on backpacking expeditions across the globe.

In the Bible, God meets with humankind on a mountain. Could that still happen today?

Years ago, I visited India and Nepal with my sister. Due to clouds and smog, we only saw glimpses of the Himalayas but never Mt. Everest. I remember sharing our disappointment as we boarded our flight leaving Kathmandu. It was highly unlikely we would ever travel to Nepal again! Unlike the rest of our group, I had a rabid fascination with Mt. Everest since childhood and had been more excited to see her than the Taj Mahal. Thus, it felt like an incomplete journey.

Exhausted from three intense weeks of travel, I immediately fell asleep. Twenty minutes later, the

man seated next to me poked my shoulder rather insistently and exclaimed, "THE HIMALAYAS! THE HIMALAYAS!" With blurry eyes, I leaned over the window to behold one of the greatest sights of my life. At 29,035 feet, Mt. Everest and her range soared high above the clouds.

Tears burned my eyes. For 20 plus years I had felt closest to God in the mountains but had never been rendered speechless until that day. India was a deeply spiritual journey but also filled with poverty, indifference and socioeconomic divides unlike any I had witnessed before. As my troubled soul was digesting all that we had experienced, Mt. Everest reminded me of God's omnipresence. Every day. Alas, it took a stranger prodding me out of sleep or I would have missed it completely!

Keep awake, dear ones, for God is ready to surprise you with wonder this week...

Answer these questions in a journal for Advent.

Discussion questions:

1. How have you experienced God "in the mountains," literally or metaphorically?
2. Which Bible stories come to mind of God's people and mountains? What significance do they hold?

Activity:

1. Find some markers or crayons. Draw a mountain. Now draw a path. If you were to meet God on a mountaintop, what questions would you ask?
2. Identify 1 book of the Bible, prayer practice or spiritual discipline you'd like to explore this month to seek insights to your questions.

Week 2: December 8-14

New shoots from an (almost) dead tree


Isaiah 11:1-3

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of these roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

Have you ever felt completely at a dead end? Stuck in a relationship, a conflict or a major that just sucked all the joy out of your soul? Hopelessness is one of the worst feelings in the world.

Israel felt that, too. The successors of King David had failed to lead the people. Destruction was abundant. War had become a way of life. Few knew the story of Yahweh and even fewer actually followed by the laws of Moses. Justice and peace were a distant, faded memory.





When we utterly lose hope—either from the current political climate or our struggling grade in Organic Chemistry—it is vital to draw strength from those who have walked the road before us. Unlike in Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*, when the stump signals the end of life, in God’s narrative, there are ALWAYS new possibilities!

God never never gave up on Israel even when they forgot Yahweh! This prophecy from Isaiah reminds us sometimes we need to go back to the very beginning (the tree-stump!) to remember our source of strength and meaning.

From the stump of Jesse, we learn about a King of humble origins that would be a signal for the nations after the exile.

Discussion questions:

1. When have you experienced “new shoots” springing out from a “stump”?
2. Whose leadership (local or global) do you admire? Whose leadership is more self-serving than for the common good? What kind of leader does God call you to be and in what capacity?

Activity:

Head out on a nature walk (leave your earbuds at home). Take note of creation around you. Where is it in the cycle of life? Where do you see signs of new life? Snap pictures of unexpected sightings, like pansies peeking through the snow or a colorful hummingbird searching for food. Offer prayers along your walk, giving thanks for God for the mystery of creation and the hope it provides.

Week 3: December 15-21 (Unexpected) Joy in the desert Isaiah 35:1

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

I thought I was a decent gardener until I moved to Arizona and encountered “caliche” soil. Our ground is so hard, so parched, they recommend using a jackhammer to dig a simple hole. This seemed preposterous until I watched my partner spend four hours digging only 10 inches to plant a lemon tree!

Desert=Death, right? Asylum seekers travel through an area of Arizona so deadly it’s called “Devil’s Highway.” There’s even an expression, “Cuidado, everything can kill you out there.” This axiom keeps children on the paths, dogs at home and plenty of adults from ever leaving town. However, we rarely encounter God if we stay in our safety bubble, right? God calls us away from

comfortability to experience new life.

Across the country, the first crocus beckons forth spring. I'm surprised to learn the same thing happens in the desert. Each spring, there's a riot of color from wildflowers scattered beside the prickly pears and saguaros. Knowing how difficult the conditions are, isn't that a defiant, joyful gift of nature? Tender, playful wildflowers determined to flourish despite the arid landscape.

Yes, the road is hard, dear ones. Too often the ground beneath us seems impossibly infertile. Yet, God sends wonder and delight, hope and grit into our lives if only we were to notice. I found a bumper sticker that asserts, "Desert People are Strong People." The ground may seem impossibly hard right now...but Scriptures teach us JOY always comes in the morning.

Discussion questions:

1. How have you survived the "hard, unforgiving desert" in your life?
2. When have you experienced unexpected Joy? Where was God in that?

Activity:

Go to the nursery/hardware store and buy a baby succulent! Here are some examples of simple crafts. Write "Desert People are Strong People" or something similar on the pot.

Week 4: December 22-24


Awaiting Immanuel

Isaiah 7:10-14

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord thyself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

"Ugh. I need a sign!" How many times have you whispered, begged or yelled those words this year? We implore our friends, advisors and Google maps to help us find the right path, but how often do we deeply pray those words?





In Hebrew, Immanuel means “God With Us.” In this single word, we receive overflowing reassurance that we are never alone. In the person of Jesus, we believe God took on human form to experience every step of the human journey. That means there is no fear, no struggle, no emotion you have that God has not also known. To remind us of this, God sends people into our lives to manifest solidarity. Your favorite professor, your roommate, the kind coffeeshop employee— they all bring the hope, peace, love of God right into our daily experience.

Unlike the human kings that ultimately led Israel into strife and exile, Immanuel will be an entirely different brand of king. As we know from our 21st-century vantage point, this King will eclipse all others yet not rule by throne or army. Justice and reconciliation move from ancient dreams to embodied truth in the form of Jesus.

Even in these dark December nights, have you seen the starlight shimmer?

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord: be strong, take heart!

Discussion questions:

1. How have you experienced Immanuel this year?
2. How has Isaiah’s prophecy given you a new perspective on preparing for Jesus?

Activity:

Make a Christmas card thanking someone who has embodied Immanuel for you. Better yet, make several!

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