

December 2022 Prayer and Praise

Recently I came across the art and writing of Jan Richardson. Jan has a unique way of putting words to the whole of the human experience. She is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, a retreat leader, and a conference speaker who has written several books such as *The Cure for Sorrow*, *Night Visions*, *In the Sanctuary of Women*, and most recently *Sparrow: A Book of Life and Death and Life*.



Jan knows what many of us know – the season of Advent can be a difficult one for many. Grief does not take time off. Jan describes grief as “a wild creature. Grief will resist every attempt to tame it, to control it, or to keep it tidy and well-behaved. Rather than managing it, grief asks instead that we tend it, listen to it, question it. One of the surest ways to calm it is to give it some space in which to speak.” Jan reminds us that the stories of Advent have much to teach us. Read on as she shares some of her own life-changing learnings.

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• **The boundaries of heaven and earth are not as fixed as we think.** In the stories of this season, we see a wondrous interplay between the realms. Angels come with strange invitations (Luke 1:5-20, 26-38) and glorious announcements (Luke 2:8-14). Wise men watch the skies and follow a star (Matthew 2:1-12). Ordinary people open themselves to the purposes of God, becoming the means by which God works on this earth. God becomes incarnate in Christ, choosing to enter fully into our human life for the purpose of showing us how heaven is already in our midst. What we tend to experience as separate realms are, in fact, part of one realm in which God is everywhere at work.

In a time when the loss of a beloved can make the separation between heaven and earth seem especially sharp, how might these stories help us perceive and enter into the fluid relationship between earth and heaven?

• **In the most difficult places on our path, spaces of sanctuary are waiting for us.** Pregnant, unmarried, and alone, Mary is in a perilous state after the archangel Gabriel departs. Rather

than attempting to tough it out on her own, Mary goes in search of someone who will help. She finds that help in the home of her cousin Elizabeth, who welcomes Mary and offers her safety, blessing, and sanctuary (Luke 1:39-45).

When we feel most alone, who could help? Where might we find a space of sanctuary—or offer it to someone on their own difficult path?

• **Remembering is a practice and an art.** Advent has a way of triggering memories that, when we are in grief, can be particularly painful. There is little to shield us against the sheer quantity of seasonal sights and sounds that remind us of holidays past, when our loved one was with us...

In the face of such memory triggers, intentional remembering can, paradoxically, become one of our most powerful practices. Mary knew about the art of remembering. The Gospel of Luke tells us that after everything—after her pregnancy, after Jesus’ birth, after the proclamation of the angels and the visit of the shepherds—*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19). She understood that the heart is a treasure house of memory. The heart is a space where our memories can be gathered together and made whole in the present.

In this season, how will I choose to practice the art of intentional remembering? Here and now, as I consciously gather and treasure the memories of my beloved, what new gift and blessing might they hold for me?

• **Hope opens us to the future but releases us into the present.** Advent draws our eyes toward the horizon as we watch and wait for the Christ who comes to us. In this season, we sing with Zechariah, *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us* (Luke 1:78). When we are in grief, looking toward the horizon with hope and anticipation is no small feat. Instead of luring us away from the present, however, Advent invites us more deeply into it, where the kingdom of God is at work even now. This is the nature of the hope that Advent cultivates in us. Rich with memory and infused with expectation, hope calls and enables us to work here and now, in company with the Christ who is already about the work of heaven in our midst. It is perhaps no mere mistake that in other ancient versions of Luke 1, Zechariah speaks not in the future tense but in the present perfect: *the dawn from on high has broken upon us*, he sings.

What am I hoping for? How does this hope inspire me to act in this moment?

• **God has a fondness for what is fragile. This means us.** Advent tells us that God came to us—and comes to us still—with complete vulnerability. Christ is to be found among what is fragile—including us, ourselves, when pain and loss have left us feeling less than whole. In coming to us as a child, Christ chooses to take on our human vulnerability. We see this not only in his birth but also, with awful clarity, at the other end of his life, when on the cross he shows us the lengths he is willing to go to in order to enter into our experience.

In my brokenness, can I see my vulnerability as a place where God wants to know me?

• **Darkness is where incarnation begins.** The gorgeous texts of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany shimmer with the light that God brings into our midst, as in the prologue to John's Gospel: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (John 1:5). Yet if we lean too quickly toward the light, we miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. God's first priority is not to do away with the dark but to be present to us in it. *I will give you the treasures of darkness*, God says in Isaiah 45:3, *and riches hidden in secret places*. For the Christ who was born two millennia ago, for the Christ who seeks to be born in us this day, the darkness is where incarnation begins.

Can we imagine the darkness as a place where God meets us—and not only meets us, but asks to take form in this world through us?

Comfort, O comfort my people, we hear God cry out in an Advent text from Isaiah (40:1). If, in this life, I cannot do away with grief, then I pray that I will at least enter into it with a heart open to this comfort, this solace that is one of the greatest treasures God offers us in the landscape of this season. This comfort is no mere pabulum, no saccharine wish. And though it is deeply personal, it is not merely that; solace does not leave us to our own solitude. True comfort opens our broken heart toward the broken heart of the world and, in that opening, illuminates a doorway, a threshold, a connection. It reveals to us a place where, in the company of heaven and earth, we can begin anew, bearing forth the solace we have found.

Reference:

Richardson, J. (2015). *This luminous darkness: Searching for solace in Advent and Christmas*.

<https://adventdoor.com/2015/12/17/this-luminous-darkness-searching-for-solace-in-advent-and-christmas/>

My thanks to Jan Richardson for sharing her story and her wisdom with us. You can read more of Jan's writings and view her artwork on her website <https://www.janrichardson.com/>.

You can download the December Prayer and Praise Calendar here.

December Prayer Calendar

- December 1 – Student Ministries will be hosting an online Zoom event, “Healthy Perspectives for Clinicals,” with a panel of nurses sharing and responding to questions. Please pray for the conversations to reach current and incoming nursing students to bring them peace and help them see, through others, how God meets them in the challenges they face.
- December 2 – Pray in this holiday season for nurses who have experienced loss this year. Ask that they would experience the compassion and comfort of our compassionate God.
- December 3 – Thank God for new NCF staff – for Jenny, Colleen, ARhonda, and Lara. Ask God to encourage each one as they learn their jobs and join their specific teams.
- December 4 – We praise God for the work he's doing through our [Sunday night prayer group times](#). As we focus on Advent, pray for nurses who need prayer, support, and encouragement to commit to participating as they are able. Use this time to draw us into deeper intimacy with you, God.
- December 5 – As the first issue of 2023 of the *Journal of Christian Nursing* is released today, ask God to refresh and empower nurses, educators, and students with the content. The lead article offers a biblical model for fostering resilience in nurses. Pray for God to use each of the articles to disciple nurses in appropriate ways to express their faith in their workplaces and with colleagues. May it also give them insight and passion to effectively care for patients' and families' spiritual needs.
- December 6 – Pray for the protection and health of our NCF staff and their families as they continue to recover from illnesses and surgeries. Give strength to their bodies and encouragement as they support the needs of their loved ones.
- December 7 – Intercede for the faculty and nurses who lead the 170+ NCF groups around the country for students and nurses. Ask God to meet them in this Advent season, so that they would encounter the Messiah in new and deeper ways!
- December 8 – Ask God to provide for year-end financial needs for NCF and for each of NCF's staff. Pray for those God is calling to give to respond wholeheartedly.
- December 9 – Pray for wisdom and discernment for the JCN team as they meet today to finalize the remaining questions for the April-June 2023 JCN historical issue and begin planning for the July-September issue. We ask God to use the writing and insights of others to strengthen the faith and practice of students and nurses.

- December 10 – We praise God and pray for the faculty advisor and student leaders who are getting an NCF student group started at Auburn University Montgomery.
- December 11 – Pray for a smooth transition for the new *Journal of Christian Nursing* editorial board which will start officially in January 2023. Pray also for each member to be invested in the process.
- December 12 – Pray for great conversations and team building for NCF staff as we love one another as Jesus loves us.
- December 13 – We ask God to use tonight's Tabletop Discussion, [Saline Taster: Living Our Calling as Salt and Light](#), to encourage and support students and nurses as they incorporate their faith into their practice and support the spiritual care needs of their patients and residents.
- December 14 – We praise God for Leanne Snively and Jenny Choi who lead our marketing and communications team. They are such a valuable part of our team! Pray for creativity, wisdom, and vision as we meet today and continue to plan for the ministry.
- December 15 – Pray for those who are discouraged. Ask the Holy Spirit to meet them in quiet times and worship with him and show them his great love and plans for them.
- December 16 – Ask God to richly bless NCF staff meetings – that the Holy Spirit would saturate regular team meetings for student ministry, professional ministry, *Journal of Christian Nursing*, and communications and marketing.
- December 17 – Rejoice with Margaret De Jong and three other RNs who last month successfully completed limited sonographer training to serve pregnancy care centers in northern Maine. Pray for them to overflow with God's love and compassion as they relate to women and teens with unexpected pregnancies and needs.
- December 18 – We are grateful for the leadership, wisdom, and insight of Kathy Schoonover-Shoffner as she leads the ministries of Nurses Christian Fellowship. May God bless her with wisdom, discernment, vision, and insight. We ask God to continue to fill her cup through his Word and quiet time with him.
- December 19 – Pray for wisdom for NCF staff as they serve students and nurses; ask God to meet each one in their Bible study and quiet times with him, to clearly hear his voice.
- December 20 – We ask God for a strong semester with new student leaders at Georgia State Perimeter college. We also thank God for the faculty advisor, Mrs. Nancy Williams, at Georgia State Perimeter College.
- December 21 – Please pray for students who are preparing to start nursing school in January. May they stay deeply rooted in God's love and plan for them and have peace and confidence as they look forward to the new journey God has called them to.

- December 22 – Pray for our faith community nurses as they provide encouragement, support, and ministry among the members of their churches, parishes, and communities. We ask God to use their faith and practice to meet the needs of those who are hurting and lonely.
- December 23 – We ask God to provide his direction and leading as we seek to follow his vision for NCF – to see students and nurses know and follow Jesus in nursing.
- December 24 – We remember students, faculty, and nurses who are working over Christmas to support the needs of others. May God give them encouragement and remind them of their purpose. We ask that they be filled with the love of Jesus so that they can give from a place of plenty. Provide comfort to those who are weary and much-needed support.
- December 25 – Sing hallelujah to the King of Kings who will reign forever and ever!!
- December 26 – We praise God for the wonderful new *JCN* editorial board and a new process where they will be more involved and engaged than the prior advisory board model.
- December 27 – We thank God for each one of our nurse group leaders and the commitment they make to supporting nurses in their work and faith. Give understanding and deep connection as we gather this evening to celebrate the work God is doing in the lives of our groups and to troubleshoot any barriers that are being experienced.
- December 28 – Pray for the December 28 – 31 Urbana 22 conference in Indianapolis. Please pray for the safety of those traveling, for the speakers and seminar leaders whose word might provide insight and challenge to the participants, and for the conveners of the conference that they might have the strength and wisdom in all the day-to-day decisions to keep the conference on schedule and on mission.
- December 29 – We remember and lift up the NCF student team who will be at Urbana to reach students who are preparing for nursing. We ask God to foster deep connections and provide support as resources and encouragement are shared. Pray too against any of the opposition forces that may try to disrupt and oppose the Lord's purposes during this life-changing event.
- December 30 – We ask God for his wisdom and insight for the newer members of our *JCN* editorial staff. These new contributing editors are still being oriented to their duties with the journal. We praise God for the wonderful staff/team that is being built.
- December 31 – Praise God for a rich year of ministry in 2022; for all he has done through student and professional groups, and myriad events. Thousands of students and nurses have been reached.