

THE ABBEY PRESENTS

EARTH ADVENT

WATCHING THE GROUND,
WAITING FOR LIGHT

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EARTH ADVENT

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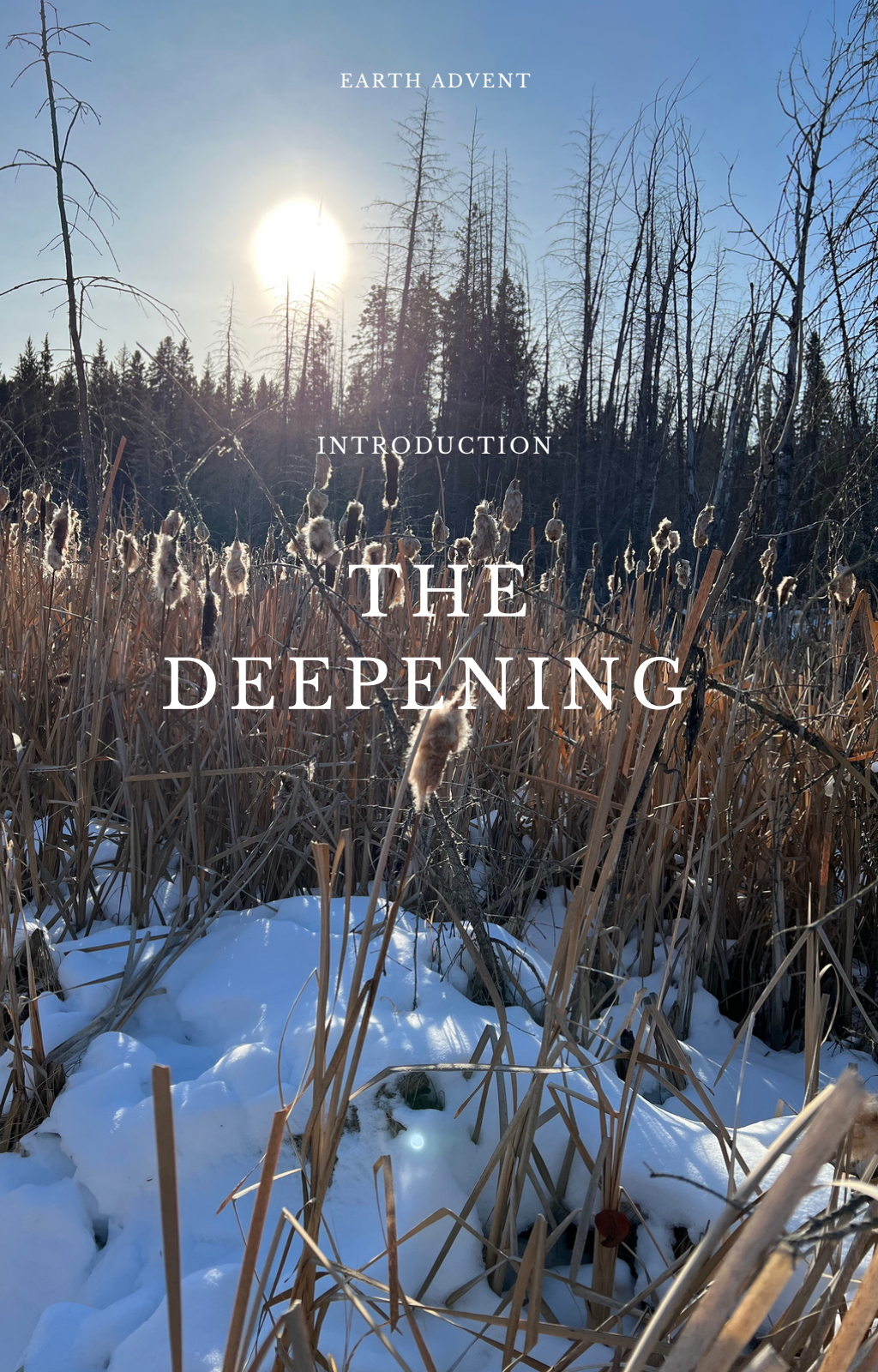
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INTRODUCTION

THE DEEPENING



The Deepening: Of Changing Seasons

Advent is a season of waiting. During the four weeks before Christmas, Christians pause, remember, and wait for the Divine to come, as they retell the Christmas story found in the Gospels. Far from only remembering a past event, during Advent we participate in it. It's the season where we name the invisible God as a child in a womb, and tell stories about angels, barren women, dreams, and long journeys. These stories are rich in meaning and rich in challenge, and their details will upend our perceptions about power, deliverance, and love—if we let them.

We wait for God to grow in the womb of the world. And when God comes, God is not above men, nor is God an apparition that looks like a man. God comes fully human and yet fully God: born to grow, learn, and lead, all while loving his Father and loving others. Ultimately, this incarnated God turns over all expectations.

In Advent we get ready for this overturning by walking the road of holy waiting. We prepare for the birth, for the future, for an in-breaking kingdom. But this kingdom is not a point “somewhere out there”. The future is not an amorphous event, nor an approaching checkmark on a timeline. During a recent lecture at Ambrose University, I heard theologian Dr. Willie Jennings remark that “the future comes from the ground.”

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Every seed that will one day bring life is first buried in soil, in this complex place of nutrients and compost and microorganisms.

No matter how much humans abstract the notion, our actual future— from this next season to the world our children inherit—depends on what comes up from the ground. Our future depends on the cultivation we do in the present. As people who wait for the advent of the Incarnated One, we do not wait for a disembodied heavenly time. We wait for the tangible “real” that emerges from the ground we cultivate, the ground we need, the ground we do not live separate from.

Could it be said that if we do not know how to attend to the actual ground, the land we are intricately a part of, we will not know how to attend to the future? In his book, *The Supper of the Lamb*, Episcopal priest and chef Robert Farrar Capon wrote, “One real thing is closer to God than all the diagrams in the world.” Practising seeing the real right in front of us, is a way to practise encountering God. These Advent reflections are a way to practise attending to the ground, and in the process, to attend to what our souls are waiting for in this season.

Now by way of preparation, let’s take a minute to reflect.

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Have you ever smelled the changing of the season? In my part of the world, there is a day where you step outside and it just smells different. And with that smell you know the inevitable truth: fall is here and winter is on its way.

The smell of fall in the foothills of Alberta is, like most things in Alberta, a study of many things being true. It is at once musty and sharp. It is warm and also crisp. There is a spice within its mellowness, and it smells old—but in the best way—like an old book. The smell is deep and layered, which in itself reveals the truth of the situation: a new layer of the earth is being laid down.

Leaves turn to blazes of colour and are taken by gusts of wind. Grasses fall over on themselves, racing each other in tangles to return to the ground. Thickets and thatches of brush become dry and bare. The life that grew over the summer makes a return to the earth; a new blanket of life intended to become soil. The earth thickens and deepens.

The Advent season is where the soil in our souls gets another layer thicker. This is the season of deepening. The Christmas stories we tell—the way Mary consents, the way Joseph trusts, the way the generations bear witness to their long wait, and to the sheer humility of God being born into the ordinary life of the creature—all of these stories are the deepening. They lay down, one over the other, covering our souls' longings with enough matter to become soil—a soil that just might grow something new and beautiful in this next season.

INTRODUCTION

Each human, even the God-Made-Flesh, is not a human without the earth. This Advent devotional is an offering that links our love of these stories with our need for connection to Earth. Over the four weeks before Christmas, in these times of polarization, ecological crises, and shallow Christian politics, may we attend to the ground—the literal landscape we live within—and there find ways to enter the waiting, then the birthing of the God-With-Us we long for. Far from being just a nice thing to do, attending to the land we live on is our work of love.

We are not apart from creation and God's work in the world is not separate from how we live in the land. The call is to love the world as Christ loves it and a practice of contemplating both the natural world and the stories of this season that have at times been commodified and sentimentalized beyond recognition could be a way into the kind of love we need. So, we will go to the ground to hear the stories anew.

Each Advent week will be a reflection on an aspect of the season and an aspect of the Advent stories. Images are offered as a way to quicken your noticing. Additionally, scripture readings from Isaiah and Luke are provided for contemplation, while outdoor practices accompany each reflection to help focus your attention to the earth. These images and observations come from interactions with the land I am most shaped by: the foothills, ravines, creeks, and forests that lay in the eastern shadow of the Rocky Mountains.

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I trust that the land you find yourself on will instruct you and will offer you a path to enter this big story of Incarnation. You don't have to have a wide wilderness close to you to do this either. Backyards and boulevards, parks, gardens and empty lots all reveal the works of God.

You are invited to cultivate wonder, humility, and discovery. May this season be a gift to you and root you in the goodness of the earth, and the goodness of the Incarnation. Let us attend to what the earth does as we also attend to the ancient stories that usher us into Christmastide. Let us hear them in chorus together as we wait for the coming of the Expected One.

There is no Incarnation, no wisdom, no redemption without the earth, without the real. Those with ears, eyes, and noses, using all of their senses, may they encounter the living God here.

A vertical photograph of a winter forest. The scene is dominated by tall, dark evergreen trees heavily laden with snow. The ground is a thick, smooth blanket of white snow, with a narrow path or clearing leading from the foreground into the distance. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a calm and quiet atmosphere. The overall color palette is a mix of deep blues, greys, and bright whites.

EARTH ADVENT

WEEK ONE

THE QUIETING

The Quieting: Of First Snows

To Contemplate

1 Kings 19: 11–13

Luke 1: 26–30

When the children were little and the days full, but lonely, I would look forward to the day in late fall when I'd wake up to a different light coming through my window. The first sign of the arrival of the snow is the way the light changes in the dark. On the morning of the first snow, the white covering becomes a reflector of what limited light there is. Even the nights are less dark because of it.

Now the second sign I'd wait for, on this new winter morning, is the sound— or the absence of it. Fresh coverings of snow muffle and dampen the sound. All is quiet, impossibly quiet. Where did all the noise go?

Every year, on this morning of fresh snow, a grace descends. All the motion, the needs, and the urgency seem to stop. Even with the inevitable scraping, shovelling, and getting to work through impassable roads, there is a moment of stillness.

The momentum of rushing and purposeful action has no choice but to become still. There is a permission to pause that comes with the first snow. All the undone work of the day before is covered up, ensuring that this morning will be slower than you are used to.

What might you hear in these moments of permission? They come so rarely in our lives of musts and imperatives and consequences for being late. Might we hear that there's more than our own lives at work, more than what happens in our own spheres? Might we hear that we are more connected than we know, and we are part of a world not of our own making?

Seattle pastor Sparrow Etter Carlson once mentioned in a talk about her urban ministry a practice she does daily. When she awakes, she opens her window and listens. She listens for the first bird, for the movement of the natural world outside her on a busy street. And in that moment of heightened hearing, what she hears is a profound affirmation that she (and we) belong to a world much bigger than our own making. The birds, their world, and indeed the entire world exist quite apart from our own ability to cause them. But even more profoundly, when we choose to hear them, we ourselves become part of this bigger story.

Mary, the woman asked to grow and raise the visible image of God, was bound in place, time, culture, fears, and hopes, just like us—just like every single human who has been, or ever will be. And one day she heard something in the middle of her expected life that plunged her into the web of the whole cosmos. She heard a calling to her own soul, and it said, “Do not be afraid; you have favour with God.” With those words she knew she was a part of the world.

How were all the things she had to do— even on that sacred day— paused and reframed with the permission to receive the words said to her? Do not be afraid.

We are bound inside a culture of unceasing noise and expectations of productivity. Perfection in exchange for profit removes our humanness: our created and redeemed belonging in this world. We need to hear that we do in fact belong; we are indeed inextricable to the cosmos. To that end, the first snow, with its pause and deep silence into which we might hear a better word, is a doorway into that belonging. In the quiet covering and muting power of snow, might we hear a profound, “You do not need to be afraid. You do not need to worry. You do not need to make the whole world turn. You have permission to be— even for a moment— right here, in this moment. You have favour with God.”

Outdoor Practice:

- With a notepad and pencil, find a spot outside near your home. Draw a point in the middle of the page that represents you, then locate the sounds around you like points on a map. Doodle what the sounds are: birds, wind, cars, people. Visually represent if the sounds are loud or quiet, intermittent or constant.
- As you do this, wonder at the world holding you within it, as it exists all on its own. Wonder at how you belong to it, body and soul. What emotions or sensations come up as you hear the sounds around you and pray with them?



EARTH ADVENT

WEEK TWO

THE ENLIGHTENING

The Enlightening: Of Cold Sunlight

To Contemplate:

Psalm 36:5–9

Luke 1:30–38

Alberta is a study in contrasts, from our weather, to our geography, to our politics. Even the way the light works is a both/and experience here in the high prairie.

The sky is impossibly wide and high. The light that fills the sky in winter takes on a crystalline quality: sometimes hazy with the cold, sometimes sharpened to a brilliance we must close our eyes to. Wild cloud formations and unique weather events are common due to our proximity to the height of the mountains and our place on the continent. We have the highest number of sunny days per year in all of Canada. Even on cloudy days, there is just so much sky that the light is still ever present, seeping around the edges and holding us in like a cover in the cold.

Winter sun is unrelenting, and yet the air is still cold. You see the light, but you don't feel the heat. When you feel its rays hitting you, the part of you still in shadow remains cold.

We get used to this incongruence as adults, but the shock of winter temperatures raises questions for a child whose day-to-day experience is being impacted. A conversation like this might be familiar to you:

3-year-old: Why do we have to put on coats and boots in the winter?

Parent: Because it's cold.

3-year-old: But why is it so cold when it's so sunny?

Parent: Because we are farther away from the sun in winter.

3-year-old: But why does that happen?

Parent: Uh, well . . . um . . . it has to do with the how Earth moves and spins on its axis, and the seasons, and . . .

3-year-old: What would happen if the world didn't move, and it stayed still?

Parent: Ummm . . . Well . . .

3-year-old: But why do I have to wear boots when it's so sunny outside? I hate my boots; I can't run fast in my boots.

Parent: (Sigh)

Children want to know about their experience—why it's changing. They are curious about everything. And grown-ups, if we're honest, like to be the answer providers.

It helps to know the “why” of the harshness of winter: the earth's axis and tilting and the need for cold poles to hold the climate in balance. However, the winter doesn't go by any faster because I have that knowledge.

Knowing why it's cold in winter doesn't take away from the felt incongruence. It doesn't satisfy our asking why because our bodies are still living through something jarring. Answers don't change the way our eyes perceive a brilliant blue sky with a yellow sun, or how our bodies hunch over, shivering involuntarily to protect our internal organs from the cold.

WEEK TWO

Even though they may learn the why of winter, each child still has to learn how to live through this harsh, and at times dangerous, season. This is a learning, more, a revelation, that only happens through experience. By bundling up and getting out into the fields where the light dazzles the tiny ice formations, they bore witness to beauty, making them think diamonds had fallen from the sky. By putting thick mitts on their hands, they could carve out a home in the waist-deep snow and pretend to be polar bears. They discovered the joy of sneaking up behind their dad to shake the canopy of snow-covered branches over his head, and the thrill of sliding down frozen hillsides piled on top of one another. As they experienced the magic of an ordinary star's light reaching through trees like fingers, trying to get at any piece of the world it can touch, they began to live out an answer to, How can this be?

The question, How can this be? Or more specifically, How can such light and such cold be together? was not answered satisfactorily by any measure of literality. But it was answered through their experience of living the question.

In this Advent narrative, we hear Mary ask the angel, "How can this be?" What was true about her and what was being told would happen to her were incongruous with the facts as she knew them. As I enter the cold season, and the necessity of living through it, I am wondering if the Advent question of, How can this be? is less a question about the facts but more a felt question of, How will I live through this?

During Advent we ask our deepest soul questions of God: How can this be? How can I trust that the Divine is present? How can I trust a tradition that has brought so much harm? How can it be that there is good news in a world of bitter power struggles? Too often we let questions stay in the realm of literal explanation where well-meaning people offer doctrines and principles to help you reason through it all. But, How can this be? is first a felt question with a living answer we must ourselves live through before we can voice an answer.

There is an incongruity, a contradiction, and an unsolvable paradox in the Advent narratives. And while many of us have been given a concrete answer, Advent returns us to a truth that we can't get to by bullet points. Only by living through and experiencing the questions do we hear an answer.

While light and shadow are inescapable siblings the world over, here, in the winter, the shadows are bluer, deeper, and longer, even at midday when the sun's zenith stays below the tree tops. This is the birthplace of an enchanted worldview. One that says (among many things), "I know I don't know how it all works, but I'm willing to enter anyway."

WEEK TWO

Outdoor Practice:

- Get outside once a day for a week but at different times each day. Take notice what the light is doing. Where it is coming from? How does it illuminate the trees, the grass, the snow, yourself differently at different times of day. Document all of the contradictions of the winter day you can see and feel by journalling or taking pictures. You may be so used to them, you won't notice them at first, but keep watching.
- Then have fun in the snow. Let yourself enjoy the cold with a walk or a winter activity. Spend time outside for free.



EARTH ADVENT

WEEK THREE

THE ENCOUNTERING

The Encountering: Of Messy Underbrush

To Contemplate:

Isaiah 41:17–20

Luke 1: 39–45

We go through regular freezes and thaws in our town. Which means the ground that is covered with that incredibly beautiful first snow is soon sullied with the dirt and oil from the melting roadways. In the thaw, the downtrodden grasses and moldering leaves might start to show through the snow—that perfect white now marked with untidy tangles. The branches, heavy with leaves and fruit five months ago, are stripped and bony, scraping the cold air day and night. The world feels barren (and truly is at first and second and even third glance). It seems unbeautiful. Dead. Empty.

And yet, this is not the fullest truth of the situation. It's true, but not the full truth. Though it appears as if the land is dead, life is very active— even beautiful. But you have to draw close.

In the winter, the bushes, brown and bare, are rife with the chittering of birds. When I pass, I see them, but more, I actually feel them lifting off.

Their quick movements create a sensation that I can only describe as a “thuddering” that accompanies me from one bush to the next, a processional of sorts. While the leafy glory of the bush may be gone for a season, the fluttering glory of chickadees and nuthatches bring it back to life.

By getting closer to the ground in winter, we see what has always been there. Animal tracks reveal their activity: the small footprints of the squirrels, the dragging tracks of the hare’s huge feet. Mice leave V-shaped indents in the snow with their feet, while their tails drag out lines behind them.

In the summer I watch as my dog chases an unseen scent. It seems haphazard and all over the place, yanking him in one direction then another. And yet, when it snows—and when I get close enough to see—I see the logic of the trails he follows. He is following the steps of small creatures now visible. Unnoticed movement, migration, and life happens in the winter— whether we are aware of it or not. But we won’t know the truth of the earth, until we pay close attention to it.

Getting close to where life is happening is the way we encounter it. Close up to real people and the actual land we live on is where the pretense is stripped away, and layers of distraction fall off. We begin to see clearly. When we don’t have to hide, when we don’t have to see only the positive, and when we get closest to the real, we can see the truth. And there is rejoicing in the truth.

Hearing the Christmas story should show us our need for proximity to the ground, to where life is composting then growing. While men and kings play with power, the truth of the world is revealed to the women, those living closest to birth, death, the land and all its seasons. A proximity to the unglorified tangle of our own humanness is required in order to be able to hear this story in ways that bring life. We won't know life is present—and we'll miss all that is happening—unless we get up close to the places where life emerges.

This is why the story of Elizabeth and Mary is so profound. They live humbly, caring for the things dependent on the ground like food, home, and family. They recognize the sacred life when it is occurring— even in their own deepest selves. The men high above, flirting with glory, do not recognize it. But the women see it and name it when they see it in one another.

When long-barren Elizabeth, now growing a prophet inside her womb, welcomed her young cousin into her home, she recognized Mary's true state. Her child leapt in her womb, quickened by coming close to the divine life in Mary. And she rejoiced.

Noticing life by getting right up to it is a practice that will help us recognize the life of God wherever it shows up. We will feel the quickening inside our own selves when we encounter the Sacred.

On the surface, the land appears barren or dirty, and the temptation would be to cover it, or to focus on the high and flashy. But life is running rampant even at our feet. Hidden in secret places, traveling paths of its own logic, and with the quickening of wings it calls out to be recognized.

Outdoor Practice

You'll need either snow pants or a blanket for this one.

- Stand in an outdoor place and look down. What do you see? What colours? What shapes? Can you name everything you are seeing?
- Now go to your knees. (This is where snow pants or a blanket come in handy.) Stay upright and look down. Do you see anything more than you did? Anything new?
- Now get as low to the ground as you can. Try to see the world from the perspective of the lowest place. What do you see? Anything you did not see before?
- Reflect on how getting closer to the ground reveals a truer picture than from far above.



EARTH ADVENT

WEEK FOUR

THE REVELLING

Week 4
The Revelling: Of Frozen Rivers

To Contemplate:

Job 38:29,30

Isaiah 26:19

Luke 1:46–56

There is a small river I go to every day. It emerges from the ground in the foothills of the Rockies west of my home, travels past fields and forests and through the lands of the Tsuut'ina people. This river by my home freezes over every year. When it does, we can walk on it. The ice is opaque, but at times has rose, aqua, or even yellow hues. We see the tracks where the deer and coyote have crossed over. We follow these tracks because we trust that the animals know more about the ice than we do; they know where to step. Maybe it's more they know how to step.

It's a shallow river, but the water never stops flowing underneath the ice. And this, to me, is a clarion call to the one looking to be transformed, by grace.

In the days of the earliest Christians, when an individual wanted to become part of the community of Christ-followers, there was a ritual that involved being baptized into living waters — a river, a lake— any water with movement that came and went into the earth.

The act of baptism was to remind one, viscerally, by descending into a place that could literally take your life, that one was indeed mortal. For those earliest Christians, Baptism was a way to enter the life of Christ, who did not consider power something to be grasped, who became fully human, even unto death. As you felt the rush of sustaining water run over you, you were reminded that your life is but a blip in the cosmos. Yet you can rise out of the water—not by your own power—but by the Spirit that enlivens every living thing and guides you as you participate in the life of Christ. It was a powerful rite, and still is.

In the early summer when the water is high, I wonder about being washed over by this water, and the power of that. But in this season of Advent, as winter and the dark descend, and the living water of Fish Creek is covered with ice and snow, I wonder: What happens when the water is hidden from view, when we cannot access it like we once could? The water seems frozen, halted, deadened. The countless fish in this river—where do they go? The weasels, the muskrats, the mice, and the beavers all live on the edges of this river—how do they survive? The algae and water reeds disappear.

Yet we know they all come back. We know that life keeps going. The life of the river does not stop, even though it may appear that way. Life on this Earth is not defeated, even when it seems to have gone underground. What happens in the darkened water of winter is still being researched.

But the ecology of the river—which is to say the life of the river and the life given from the river—is shaped and affected by what happens when the ice covers it. This is where the promise lies: even though we do not see what’s happening under the ice, life is there. Life is being sustained and then shaped for the next season.

The concept of hiddenness is as deep a part of our Advent story as that of the promise and of the waiting. The womb is dark, and life grows there quite apart from our efforts. And yet life still grows.

The promise of being saved from oppression—from that web of sin and trauma that entangles generation after generation, and from our own need to control—this promise holds, and dreams come true. But these all stay hidden throughout the Advent story. The Christ grows unseen in the womb of the mother, the womb of the world. The salvation humanity longs for comes through the darkened processes that enable life. The grace and glory that the Christian story claims has come, not in spite of the darkness, but through it.

There is something necessary about the darkness of the womb, or the soil, or the darkened river. This is the mystery of grace and glory. It comes as the unseen development. It is not loud. Nor is it marketable. It can never be for sale and it can never be forced. It is only noticed, encountered, and then joined and trusted.

We know much about hidden processes due to research and technology, yet the mystery remains of how in the dark life comes. Maybe we don't need to expand more than this. Maybe when we come across a frozen river, we can remember that the promise of the unseen mysteries can be trusted to be working, to be flowing below our perception, bringing life. The wisdom of it all is that mystery is the thing that keeps us human.

“We need mystery,” Richard Wagamese wrote in his novel *Indian Horse*. “Creator in her wisdom knew this. Mystery fills us with awe and wonder. They are the foundations of humility, and humility, grandson, is the foundation of all learning.”

I wonder if we could say that one who knows all the answers and has no questions is not one who easily encounters the living God. The one who recognizes that life is a mystery to be encountered and a grace to be received is receptive, and open to being transformed.

This is upside-down language. We are saved not by our own efforts to be holy or have the exact right theology, but by being confronted and then transformed by something that on its surface does not make sense. Similarly, it is upside-down language in Luke 2 when Mary, literally growing salvation, exclaims, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”

We will not understand what the God of the cosmos is doing unless we learn to live in the mystery of upside-down things: knowing that it is not our power over life and death, our wealth, or our political or social power that rescues us from the mire we make for each other, generation after generation. This deliverance is what happens in the most secret and closest to the ground places, to the least powerful creatures. God is revealed; salvation is accomplished.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and Nazi resister who was executed in 1945, wrote often about Advent and Christmas in his sermons and later in his letters from prison. In his profound encounter with suffering caused in part by the corruption and co-opting of the Christian faith, he wrote about this mystery:

"And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."

To see this, to live into this, to walk into this Christmas story we must practice living inside the mystery. We must practice encountering, fostering, and trusting that God's life happens in the unseen places, to the unlikeliest of people. And for that we can start by encountering the frozen river.

One last thought:

The gift of it all is that we get reminders of the life underneath everything. The river, flowing over uneven rocks and shoals, carving out deeper curves and oxbows every season, emerges at times through the ice. We see the flow of the water through holes, cracks, and fissures of the covering. And even the sound this makes is a reminder of the unseen but still true life that is flowing and will not be stopped. While a river rushes and brooks babble, a frozen creek makes a deeper, guttural sound. I can only describe it as a “tonkleing.” It is the sound of the earth humming, low in its chest, with hints of a bubbling, low laughter as it keeps on doing the work of life in the dark. It is a revelling in the mystery.

Listen for the “tonkle”. Look for the ways the water flows under the surface. Encounter the Living One there— for there, in the dark, is where our story always begins.

Outdoor Practice:

- Learn about the watershed your drinking water comes from. Where does it come from and where does it travel to after you?
- Then go to the closest river and watch it. Listen to where it is alive. That’s it. That’s the practice. Do this as often as you can.

EARTH ADVENT

POSTSCRIPT

THE VIGIL



The Vigil: Of Thin Ice and Thin Places

The Celtic Christian tradition talks of thin places where the distance between heaven and earth collapses. The Divine and the human are interconnected, and we sense it. These are real places, plots in time and space, where the more, the sacred, and the infinite are apprehended in a way not normally found in the bustle of daily life. Thin place moments are not guarantors of a grandiose spiritual enlightenment. They are flashes of encounter whereby we are more likely to be disoriented and lose our bearings, but we can also find new ones. Thin places will jolt us out of old ways of seeing the world.

There is a pond by my home that freezes over from the outside in. At the center, the water shows through. This thin place in the barely formed ice reflects the sky back to itself like a portal or a threshold. As I stare, I know that it could undo me. That ice is dangerous, and yet the moment is fraught with beauty.

A thin place is one that transforms us, or more accurately, un.masks us, reflecting us back to ourselves. Just like the thin ice of the pond, thin places are not safe. They could break away at any moment, plunging us into a place with no footholds, no way to get back to our normal way of living. We can't unsee what we see in those places. This is the gift and the terror of them. Thin ice, thin place – they are the same thing.

When we fall into these thin places, we become our more essential selves. We recognize ourselves through the awareness of the presence of something holy. As a result, we become more whole in that encounter with God.

However, holy places and experiences can often become fraught under the weight of expectations. They can be manipulated and marketed. They can also become just too heavy and weirdly disorienting. This seems to be the weight of the commercialized Christmas: a thin place marketed—both in the secular and the religious—and sold to us. But the possibility of holy encounters with the Divine . . . they aren't marketable.

I believe that the stories that create Advent and those of Jesus's birth could create a thin place if we get quiet enough to let them speak. They could be a world to walk into without expectations (if we gave ourselves permission). These stories could be a source of joy when we let ourselves live out the questions they pose, instead of trying to control the answers. By trusting what's happening under the surface—where we are not in control—they could bring in a rush of new life.

The Christmas narrative is a web of tales about unwed mothers, barren old women, widows who wait, and men silenced because they lacked imagination. It is a story of field labourers given the highest honor and of cunning kings who lie. We meet astrologers who seek and skies that come alive and sing.

Moreover, it is a story of babies and new life in the unlikeliest of circumstances. Where the light comes as promised, but is hidden in a womb, and where power arrives in the form of the most powerless.

Thin places are found in this sort of disorientation or contradiction. So often we settle for encountering this season of Advent (and Christmas as a whole) with an explanatory, palatable attitude that weighs the whole celebration down so as to render it marketable at best, coercive and sentimental at worst. We miss any chance for transformation. As Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his cell, “Advent creates people. New people.” A call we might hear from within this thin place is the call to become new.

Since thin places exist beyond our own making, we can only encounter them when we are attentive to our surroundings. Therefore, the practice of Advent is to pay attention. How can we practise this awareness in our ordinary days? If the Christmas stories are too fraught for you with the heavy doctrines, expectations, or shallow marketing, could you look instead for the thin place in the world around you?

Where is the curtain being moved aside to see the real? In which stand of trees? Which group of people? What body of living water?

What old way of seeing must be jolted into something new? What is the encounter with the sacred that you need? Where is the Christ Child being born unto us, even today?

There is no Incarnation without Mary, a daughter of the earth. Which means there is no Incarnation without the earth: its processes, its limitations, its beauty, its teachings, its deepening. The earth for so long has held everything for us, while we used it up and called that virtue. A reckoning is happening between humanity and the earth. We are at a threshold where there needs to be a transformation of our hearts and habits, our theology and our anthropology. They all have to love the cosmos as God loved it.

So, let's attend to both of these— the child growing within Mary and the earth we live within—as we begin the long vigil of Christmas.

We wait in hope and in awe that the light comes at all. This waiting helps cultivate the kind of trust that is useful in this world, that is needed. Whether this is a waiting for winter to do its work, or a waiting for the coming of God as an infant, the way we wait determines what we receive; the way we wait might determine what we find. Or more accurately, what finds us.

POSTSCRIPT

Friends, as you enter this Advent story once again, hear these words:

May this year be a year you encounter Emmanuel, God-With-Us, coming to your own neighborhood, disguised in the ordinariness of soil, underbrush, children, snow and light.

May this year you receive the gift of new sight to see the future that comes from loving the Earth.

And may this year be a year of transformation for you, of the utter overturning of all you thought you knew by the long-awaited Christ child.

Amen.



EARTH ADVENT

With much gratitude to Carla Myers for her patient
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And to the great loves of my life -
my family and Fish Creek



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