



PREPARE HIM ROOM

ADVENT REFLECTIONS ON WHAT HAPPENS
WHEN GOD SHOWS UP

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A Note From Amy Julia

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Lights and bells and trees and wreaths. Music and eggnog and stockings and gifts. Candy canes and “Jingle Bells” and “Silent Night” and gingerbread. The list of delights (and excesses) at Christmastime could fill a whole page, and these delights usually start right around the first of December (or earlier, if the Santa-themed candy at our local CVS in October was any indication).

Whether or not you are a religious person, it’s clear in December that Christmas is coming. Traditionally, some Christians observed Advent as a season to prepare for Christmas Day. And traditionally, there was a mournful quality to Advent quite out of keeping with “American Christmas.” **It was a time of spiritual preparation, which included repentance and expressing a longing for Jesus to return in all his fullness.**

These days, the culture at large doesn’t recognize Advent. December is a time for festivities and shopping and holiday cheer. I used to feel some degree of indignation at the commercialism and extravagance of this time of year. And I used to protest that we’ve gotten the timing all wrong. According to the traditional church calendar, the party doesn’t start until December 24th, and only then we should enjoy twelve days of feasting,

from December 25th to January 5th. (That's where the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" comes from, as well as the idea of "Twelfth Night.")

I've lightened up, especially as I have watched our children's joy emerge during this season. We make gingerbread houses at the library and trim the tree and sit on Santa's lap and listen to both secular and religious Christmas music throughout the month of December.

But I still want to acknowledge these weeks leading up to Christmas as a time of waiting—a time of eager expectation and a time of mournful longing—for Jesus to come into the world.

This book is intended to help guide us through some spiritual preparation for Christmas, in both the mourning and the rejoicing. If you read this one day at a time over the course of the 25 days ahead, you will read through the birth narratives of Matthew, Luke, and John (and the very brief introduction to Jesus' life in Mark).

I hope and pray these pages will deepen and widen your experience of Christmas this year.

December 1

Jesus Came From a Dysfunctional Family

Matthew 1:1-17

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziyah, Uzziyah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of

Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elibud, Elibud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

We had Marilee's parent/teacher conference a few weeks ago. We heard about her leadership in the classroom and the play she is writing with her friend Nathan. She's kind to the other kids. She loves math. And she loves writing—especially acrostic poems.

At the end of our time together, her teacher pulled out one poem written to the theme of FAMILY. It begins as expected—sweet and happy, something any child of the 21st century might write and share on social media. As it continues, it builds to a crescendo of perfect-family-ness with the line “Inviting love into my house and giving love away.” I must admit my heart swelled when I read it, and I thought, *Maybe we are doing something right as parents!*

And then I read the conclusion: “Laughing as a family. Yelling at my brother.”

The end. I love this poem.

Why? **I love it because it isn't the fake version of our family—I love it because it represents who we are.** We are a family that laughs and yells. We are a family that sometimes thinks nasty thoughts about other people. We are a family that prays for other people. We are a family with high ideals and expectations and also a family that recently watched the movie *Major League* together (definitely NOT one for the seven-year old!). We screw up sometimes; we get it right sometimes. **We laugh. We yell.**

Family is often on my mind this time of year. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is rife with decisions about which family members we want (or are obligated?) to see. For so many of us, going home for the holidays means walking back into old patterns of teenage petulance, codependency, resentment, and snarky remarks toward siblings. We laugh. We yell.

I've taken comfort in an unusual Biblical text as I've thought about our little band of dysfunctional humans trying (and often failing) to love each other, love God, love our neighbors. As I wrangle with extended family about who is going where on what day, who is disagreeing with whom about how the presents should be purchased, who is offending whom by not staying long enough or staying too long, or who is worried about this person's drinking problem and that person's parenting and that one's passive aggressive nature—**in the midst of it all, I take comfort in Jesus' family tree.**

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a rendering of Jesus' lineage that ends with Joseph. While this is a list of names I am tempted to skip past, I have been pausing to consider them and the truth they offer: **Jesus came from a dysfunctional family.** He emerged out of people who yelled at each

other. He, light and life, came from people who betrayed one another, who had adulterous affairs, and who turned their back on God.

Furthermore, these weren't just Jesus' distant relatives. Jesus was born as an illegitimate son, to an unmarried mother, with a human father who had considered divorce. Jesus was born as an outcast from society, with parents who seem to have been cut off from their family. It seems likely that the rest of the clan thought Joseph and Mary were delusional, since they claimed that God himself had put a stamp of approval on what seemed to be Mary's obvious sexual sin.

So in the midst of the intrigue and rumors, Jesus is born. Jesus, the one who will "save the people from their sins." **The one who fulfills the promise that God will be with us.** God will be with us in the laughter and the yelling, in the sin and in the glory.

I take great comfort and great hope that Jesus can be born in our midst day after day. That light and life and salvation, good news for us and for all people, can enter into our dysfunction and pain, enter into our extended family's dysfunction and pain, enter into our world's dysfunction and pain. **Advent is a season of waiting, a season of longing, a season of anticipation.**

In the midst of the argument over who needs to sit next to Aunt Gertrude and listen to her stories, the pain over loved ones who aren't here to gather around the table, the unhealthy decisions about food and drink, the glitz and glitter and spending too much and caring too much about appearances, Jesus promises to be God with us. He promises to welcome us, as we are, into the family of God.

December 2

Hopes and Fears

Matthew 1:18-21

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The first Christmas after our daughter Penny was born, we were singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It contains the lines: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Penny was diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth, and I heard the lines in that hymn and I wrote these words in my journal:

I am filled with contradictory emotions—The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. Struck by how much hope I have for Penny—that she will live a full life with friends and laughter and arguments with her siblings and an ability to give back to her community and a knowledge of God’s love. Hope that she will go to school and that her heart will heal and that she will speak clearly and read and write and walk and run and dance. Hope that she will sing and play music and ride horses. Hope that she will be received by many for who she is, valued by many, loved. Hope that she will surpass expectations—physical, mental, social, emotional. So much hope.

And with that hope comes intense fear that little of it will come to pass, that she will suffer, be mocked, that her little body will betray her. Fear that she won’t succeed or that she won’t have friends, or that we won’t be able to give her what she needs. Fear that Down syndrome is what I thought it was a year ago. Fear that our culture is right, that she is undesirable, that an extra chromosome is a mistake. I don’t want to hope, sometimes, because I don’t want the fear that accompanies the hope.

I remember how frightening it was to have hope, how scary to look to the future and expect God to work, to expect good things even if they might be difficult, to expect joy. But God gave us reason to hope in the gift of our daughter, and we have held onto our hope for her ever since.

In this passage from Matthew, the angel implies that Joseph is afraid to take Mary home as his wife. Maybe he is afraid that the angel is a delusion. Or maybe he believes that this miraculous thing really happened, but he is afraid that other people won’t believe them. (You can just imagine his friends’, his siblings’, his neighbors’ reactions. Right, Joseph. An angel. A virgin birth. You sure you didn’t just have too much to drink?) Or maybe

he is afraid that what the angel has said is true. Maybe he is afraid to have hope.

I'm grateful that we aren't asked to get rid of our fears in order to claim hope, but rather we are invited to bring hope and fear all in a mixed up jumble to Jesus.

I needed to bring my hopes and fears for Penny to Jesus. And then, even with my typically developing kids, I brought hopes and fears. Hope that they will know their own intrinsic worth. Hope that they will make friends. Hope that they will find activities and subjects that interest them. Hope that they will be kind. And fear that they will experience loneliness and rejection. Fear that they will be mean to other kids. Fear that I will project my own expectations on them. Fear that they won't know how beloved they are.

I still experience fear sometimes, but over the years that I have been a parent, as I have watched all three kids make mistakes and experience hardship and screw up and as I have watched them learn and grow and love, I have found that the fear has receded and the hope has remained.

I think maybe Joseph experienced the same thing. Just enough hope to overcome his fear. Just enough hope to ignore the skeptics. Just enough hope to take Mary as his wife and get ready for the baby boy God had given them.