

⊕ LIVING COMPASS

Living Well Through Advent 2023



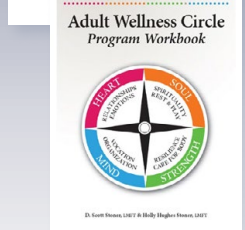
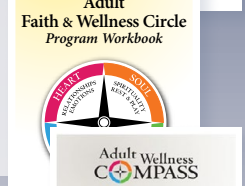
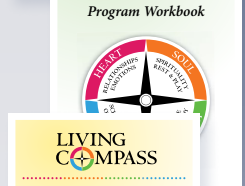
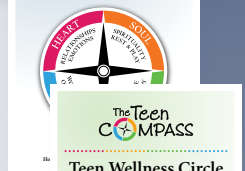
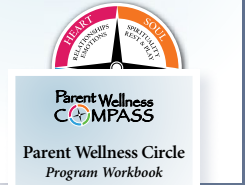
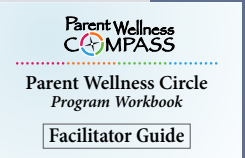
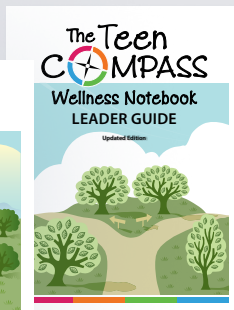
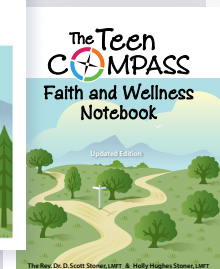
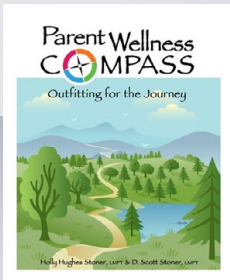
*Practicing Wonder with All Your Heart,
Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative

In addition to our Advent and Lent devotionals (in English and Spanish), Living Compass offers a number of resources (faith-based and secular) and trainings designed to outfit individuals, families, congregations, and organizations for the journey toward wellness and wholeness. Recognizing that we have a variety of resources that can be used in many creative ways, we offer several ways to learn about, experience, and to become more familiar with them.

We invite you to visit our website: livingcompass.org. There you will find more detailed information about our resources, including books, workbooks, facilitator guides for many of our programs, Wellness Circles, Community Wellness Advocate Certificate Trainings, as well as individual training and consultation options. You can also sign up for the Living Compass newsletter, which is the best way to learn about upcoming trainings, highlighted resources, and other opportunities.



To learn more about our resources and our Community Wellness Advocate training, please contact our Program Director Carolyn Karl at Carolyn@LivingCompass.org.

Living Well Through Advent 2023



*Practicing Wonder with All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas.

While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and to make this resource possible.



Outfitting individuals, families, congregations, and organizations with tools and training for the journey toward wellness and wholeness.

Copyright ©2023 Scott Stoner. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission of the author.

Editor: Robbin Brent

Cover design: Jane Dorn

Proofreader: Holly Stoner

Compositor: Rick Soldin

The Scripture quotations used in this publication, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Digital Publication Data

Stoner, Scott

Living well through advent 2023: practicing wonder with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind / Scott Stoner

p. cm.

ISBN – Digital Edition: 978-1-944146-41-2

1. Advent 2. Daily Reflections 3. Christian life 4. Spiritual

I. Title

Printed in the United States of America.

Photo Credits

- **Cover and interior image:** *Rainbow on Coast*; Name: Marcus Woodbridge on Unsplash, <https://unsplash.com/photos/Zu5eyzwwPpU>
- **Lent cover image:** *White Flower at Sunset*, inside back cover; Name: Irina Iriser on Unsplash, <https://unsplash.com/photos/IY6DmKR8sYQ>

Contents

About the Writers	4
<i>Robbin Brent</i>	
<i>David Dill</i>	
<i>Jess Elfring-Roberts</i>	
<i>Regan Schutz</i>	
<i>Scott Stoner</i>	
The Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Advent 2023	5
Introduction	6
<i>Living Compass Podcast</i>	7
<i>Spanish Advent Devotional</i>	7
The Living Compass: A Brief Overview	8
Ways to Use Living Well Through Advent 2023	10
The First Sunday of Advent	11
<i>Wonder and Love</i>	13
The Second Sunday of Advent	19
<i>Wonder and Stories</i>	21
The Third Sunday of Advent	27
<i>Wonder and Thin Places</i>	29
The Fourth Sunday of Advent	35
Christmas Day	37
Scripture, Quotes, Prayers & Practices for Advent	39

-
- This guide is also available as an eBook on amazon.com, and as a free PDF download at livingcompass.org/advent
 - Find us on the web: livingcompass.org
 - Questions? Email us: info@livingcompass.org

About the Writers

Robbin Brent is the director of publications and resource development for Living Compass, a spiritual director, founder of Wisdom Way of Knowing, and the former director of the Center for Spiritual Resources in NC. An experienced leader of spiritual retreats and programs, she facilitates gatherings of contemplative leaders, and is a graduate of Shalem Institute's *Transforming Community* and *Spiritual Guidance* programs. She loves spending time with her two sons, their partners, and four grandchildren. She also enjoys hiking, reading, and watching sunrises and the wondrous array of wildlife that graces her backyard.

The Rev. David Dill is an Episcopal priest who has served as Rector of Chapel of Our Saviour in Colorado Springs since 2017. A graduate of Yale Divinity School, he has also served churches in Massachusetts and Alabama. David and Mary Alex are the proud parents of two always singing and dancing daughters, Ella and Lena, and two usually sleeping rescue dogs, Oscar and Mabel. Together, they love exploring Colorado, a place they never dreamed they would live!

The Rev. Jess Elfring-Roberts (she/they) is a deacon in the Episcopal Church, and currently serves as Executive Director for Episcopal Camps & Conference Centers (ECCC). She is an Improv teacher at The Second City Training Center Chicago, and a member of Urban Pebble Productions, a Chicago filmmaking collective. Jess loves spending time with her family and watching her kiddos grow up. She also enjoys writing and directing films, and performing Improv.

The Rev. Regan Schutz, by way of a sojourn in Sewanee, Tennessee, currently serves as rector of historic Christ Episcopal Church & Christ Church Day School in Coronado, California. Regan's fascination with WONDER began a lifetime ago when she ran the Godly Play Foundation for almost a decade. A student of Jerome Berryman, Regan's academic work on wonder has led to a Doctor of Ministry from The University of the South, where she also graduated with a Master of Divinity. A wife and mother of two, Regan's roots are sunk deep in the forests of Oregon.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. He is also host of the newly launched Living Compass podcast. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 45 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*, and are co-hosts of the Wellness Compass Podcast. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family, especially with his two grandsons.

The Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Advent 2023

Advent Year B	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
First Sunday of Advent December 3, 2023	Isaiah 64:1-9	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	1 Corinthians 1:3-9	Mark 13:24-37
Second Sunday of Advent December 10, 2023	Isaiah 40:1-11	Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13	2 Peter 3:8-15a	Mark 1:1-8
Third Sunday of Advent December 17, 2023	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	Psalm 126 OR Luke 1:46b-55	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	John 1:6-8, 19-28
Fourth Sunday of Advent December 24, 2023	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16	Luke 1:46b-55 OR <i>Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26</i>	Romans 16:25-27	Luke 1:26-38

Introduction

Welcome to our journey through Advent and our focus on *Practicing Wonder with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. In these challenging and complicated times, on the surface it may seem like focusing on wonder is a luxury, a nice bonus or extra in one's life if one has the space to do so. But in reality, it is critical to our well-being.

Wonder invites us to pay attention to the Sacred that is present in every moment. To practice wonder is to practice being curious and open to the movement of the Spirit. It is an essential practice this time of year when the culture puts many demands on us, wanting us to complicate our lives by doing more, buying more, eating more, etc. Focusing on wonder, especially a profoundly spiritual interior wonder, is indeed counter-cultural. This makes it a perfect focus for Advent because the season of Advent itself is counter-cultural. So let us embrace whole-heartedly the season of Advent, along with these reflections, as the support we need to practice wonder in a way that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

I want to call your attention to a new offering: the Living Compass podcast. I record three short episodes three times a week during Advent. I also encourage you to take a close look at the collection of quotes, Bible verses, prayers, and contemplative practices that we have included on pages 39–50. We started including these a few years ago, and many people find that these enhance their daily readings. If there is a particular practice that speaks to you, this Advent might be just the right time to try it out.

We are grateful for our three guest writers this Advent: David Dill, Jess Elfring-Roberts, and Regan Schutz. My Living Compass



colleague Robbin Brent has also gifted us with her writing, as well as the inspired collection of quotes, Scripture verses, and prayer practices found in the back of this booklet. Each of these voices will help us reflect on where the Spirit is calling us to practice wonder in our lives.

It is good to be on this Advent journey together with you.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner



Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative



The Living Compass podcast, a year-round offering, provides additional enrichment opportunities during Advent by releasing three weekly episodes that focus on our theme of *Practicing Wonder with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. Each episode, about six minutes long, can be found

at LivingCompass.org/podcast or by searching for “Living Compass” in your favorite podcast app.

Living Compass—working with The Rev. Pedro and Estela Lopez from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas—has also published *Vivir un buen Adviento en el 2023: Practicando la admiración con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*, a Spanish Advent devotional with completely original content. To learn more or to order, visit livingcompass.org/advent. Questions? Contact us: info@livingcompass.org.



The Living Compass: A Brief Overview

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

The Living Compass Model for Well-Being offers us guidance in four dimensions of our being: heart, soul, strength, and mind. Just like a mobile or kinesthetic art, these dimensions are interconnected—movement in one area affects all the others. We are not compartmentalized people. Whatever impacts one area of our lives (positively or negatively) has an impact on the other areas. Each of the four compass points focuses on two areas of well-being, and each of the eight areas helps to guide and equip us as we commit to being more intentional about the way we live our lives. The purpose of this Compass is to provide a dynamic resource that will assist us in our search for balance and wellness. The invitation is to live an undivided life, where heart, soul, strength, and mind are integrated into both our *being* and our *doing*.

Areas of Wellness

Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.

Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to connect with a higher purpose in life and to have a clear set of beliefs, morals, and values that guides our actions.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.

Strength

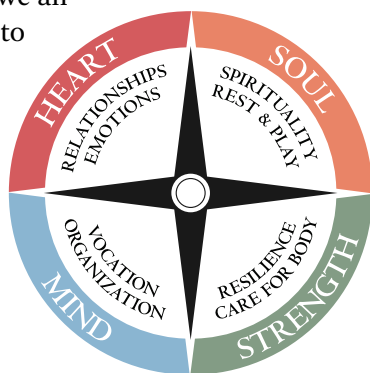
- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being.



Mind

- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents we've been given. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment pursuits.
- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of spirituality and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we intentionally choose the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that *health*, *healing*, *wholeness*, and *holy* all come from the same root word *hal* or *haelen*.



The Living Compass

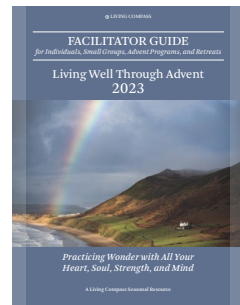
Ways to Use Living Well Through Advent 2023

A Personal Devotional and an Advent Program

This devotional is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as we journey through Advent. We begin each Sunday with a reflection written by one of our guest writers. Every Monday we introduce a theme for the week related to *Practicing Wonder*. The other days of the week begin with Scripture or a quote, followed by a reflection, and then “Making it Personal” questions, which offer an opportunity for you to reflect on the readings as they relate to your own life and spiritual journey. You might want to write down important thoughts, feelings, or insights, so we encourage you to have a journal nearby to use as a companion to this devotional.

Practicing Wonder can also be used by groups. We all benefit from a community of support, and this guide can be used to form or deepen that community. If you would like to use it for a church Advent program (online, or in person if possible), our Facilitator Guide (offered as a free downloadable PDF on our website) provides guidance on how to use this devotional in a small-group setting.

The devotional is perfect as a resource for a half- or full-day Advent retreat (more on this in the Advent Facilitator Guide). Giving each person a copy of this devotional (both printed as well as a free PDF are available on our website) would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Advent.



Another option we now offer for engaging this material is through a daily email that you can sign up to receive. To learn more about this resource, visit our website: LivingCompass.org/Advent.

This Advent season, however you use this devotional, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

The First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2023

The Power of Love and Wonder

by Regan Schutz

What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

—Mark 13:37

I wonder at the power of love. A seemingly pedestrian pondering, I know—a Christmas-time cliché. But I am just now beginning to grasp how truly love can transcend everything we think we understand. It has been a bittersweet lesson to learn. Yet when it gets especially difficult, it has helped me to remember that Easter only comes after Good Friday's sorrow.

Last year I noticed a proliferation of Blue Christmas gatherings. While the world gives us soft glowing lights, images of fireside family celebrations, and Hallmark-style romances in the snow, the reality is that this is a hard time of year for a lot of people. There is a palpable tension as the days grow shorter. And when we are struggling, we may feel the darkness more deeply.

My own tension comes from a journey with my dad and dementia. The gradual losses and prolonged grief of dementia are called “the long good-bye,” and nothing on this road is easy. However, I have encountered a beautiful surprise in the midst of my grief: despite not always knowing my name or even who I am, my dad's love for me is still present. We like to go for drives together, and I can feel our dad-and-daughter love as we sit side by side, cozy in the car.

I wonder at the power of love. It is possible that what I feel in his presence is simply my own memory of his affection and love. But I am pretty confident it is more than that. I am beginning to see that love that exists *simply exists*, whether we can express it or not. Through time and space, adversity and divide, love remains. Love is a constant.

If you need a break from the Hallmark channel (which we just might secretly love), I recommend checking out the film *Interstellar* with Matthew McConaughey, Anne Hathaway, and Jessica Chastain. It is

an awe-inspiring science fiction exposition on love: how love defies all wondering about its power—how love defies all dimensions of our universe. It is a story about the power of love being not only a constant through space and time, but actually accessible through space and time if we awaken to its experience.

The wonder of love is that love never dies. And even in a long good-bye, the power of love prevails. At some point my dad will not be able to sit next to me on a drive down memory lane. At some point, he will not be able to sit next to me at all. And yet I face this unavoidable reality with both wonder and faith, trusting that we can and will go on loving each other for eternity. That love transcends *everything*. And every Blue Christmas is proof of the incredible power of love.

Blessings on your journey through Advent! May your wondering awaken your sense of awe as we get ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas.



Monday, December 4, 2023

Wonder and Love

by Scott Stoner

*Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.*

—Christina Georgina Rossetti

I remember a Christmas Eve when I was four or five years old. My parents had tucked me in bed, kissed me good night, but as I lay there wondering when Santa would arrive, it was just too hard to fall asleep. So I got up and looked out the window, hoping to glimpse the man from the North Pole and his reindeer.

While I didn't see any reindeer, miraculously I did see Santa! Just as I glanced out the window, he walked up to our neighbor's door and stood on the stoop. I tried to yell to my sister, who was in the bedroom next to mine, but as flabbergasted as I was, I could not make a sound come out of my mouth. Finally, catching my breath, I ran around the house until I gathered everyone at my bedroom window. By that time, Santa was gone (I later learned that the neighbors had hired "Santa" to surprise their party guests), and because I knew he would be at our house very soon, in a panic I insisted we all get to bed immediately.

That's when I discovered that wonder can leave us speechless. Like love, wonder opens the heart and touches our soul. As Regan Schutz wrote so poignantly yesterday, there is a deep vulnerability in both wonder and love.

Each Monday during Advent we will introduce a theme for the week that will focus on an aspect of our overall theme of *Practicing Wonder*. This week we will focus on the connection between wonder and love.

Making It Personal: Can you think of a time when you had an experience of wonder and/or love that you could not express in words? What initial thoughts do you have about the connection between love and wonder?

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

The Light of Love & Wonder Shines in the Darkness

by Scott Stoner

*What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.*

—John 1:4-5, The Message

Regan Schutz wrote about the proliferation of Blue Christmas services many churches now offer in December. The intention of these services is to honor and make room for the grief many people are feeling this time of year. It may be their first Christmas since a significant loss, or a time of year that brings back feelings of grief from a loss suffered long ago.

Our culture generally has a hard time acknowledging feelings of grief. That difficulty can be magnified this time of year with messages from songs, movies, and advertisers trying to convince us that surely this must be the “happiest or most wonderful time of the year.” This is why it is important to create space for our grief and sadness, both for ourselves, and within our community gatherings.

One of the profound gifts of Jesus' birth is captured beautifully in the opening words of the Gospel of John. One translation describes Jesus' birth this way: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” While *The Message* translation reads: “The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.”

As people of faith, we need never be afraid of the darkness or sadness of our grief. The wonder of the incarnate Light of Christ allows us to embrace our grief, knowing that this Light, this love of Christ, can help us to not be overcome by our suffering.

Making It Personal: Are you experiencing grief right now? If so, do the holidays magnify that feeling? How does the Light of your faith help you hold that loss and sadness?



Wednesday, December 6, 2023

A Feast of Wonder and Love

by Robbin Brent

*O Saint of love,
be a guide for us
in our lives, we pray,
that we may
create joy for each other,
as you have done for so many.*

—a prayer from the town of St. Nikola an der Donau, Austria

There are many stories and traditions that encircle the life and ministry of St. Nicholas. He was revered during his life centuries ago, and still to this day, for being the patron saint of children, sailors and ships, travelers, a wonder-worker for those in need, and a generous gift giver, just to name a few.

St. Nicholas not only gave generously from the heart, he also gave anonymously as a way of honoring his faith. Continuing the tradition of his gift-giving, in many homes, the Feast of St. Nicholas begins the evening before with the sharing of sweets, chocolates, small gifts, and simple fun poems and riddles. Then before bed, children put out their shoes, some putting carrots and hay for St. Nick's horse and wishing for a gift in exchange for the food. On the morning of December 6, children wake to find candy canes, small coins, and other modest delights in their shoes.

Out of these beginnings grew our traditions of Santa Claus, whose name originated from St. Nicholas. Honoring the Feast of St. Nicholas is the perfect way to bring to life our theme this year for the first week of Advent: wonder and love.

Making it Personal: Have you ever celebrated St. Nicholas Day by putting out shoes or exchanging small gifts with children or others? If not, might this be one way to infuse the season with wonder and joy? Or, perhaps you might consider giving a modest gift anonymously this Advent in honor of your faith.

Thursday, December 7, 2023

Whoa and Wonder

by Scott Stoner

Children see magic because they look for it.

—Christopher Moore

There is something special about being around children at Christmas because they remind us that we are all children at heart. The embodiment of wonder, our six-year-old grandson has a unique way of expressing wonder. Whenever he encounters something new and exciting, he stops and shrieks, “Whoa!” He could be reacting to a bird in a tree, frost on a window, seeing a tiger at the zoo, or looking at the stars at night. Throughout Advent we hear his exclamations about the lights on the tree, visiting Santa, the snow beginning to fall, and putting up the creche.

Recently, as a friend was telling me about some tutoring work she was doing with refugees, I found myself responding, “Whoa, that is so powerful.” I call encounters like these “whoa moments.” Times when we experience something that causes us to stop and wonder, or to be filled with awe at the wonder of the myriad ways God shows up in our lives.

In a few weeks, we will celebrate the ultimate *whoa moment*, the story of Jesus’ birth. To help us prepare for our celebration, we might want to practice paying closer attention to some of the “whoa moments” we encounter day to day, but may easily overlook. If you need some help recognizing them, you might find it helpful to spend some time with a child. Children naturally have a tendency to help reawaken our sense of wonder and awe.

Making It Personal: Can you think of a recent *whoa moment* that you experienced? What might help you be more open to noticing such moments during this season? How might you offer the wonder of love to someone in such a way that it might create a *whoa moment* for them?



Friday, December 8, 2023

Raindrops on Roses

by Robbin Brent

They [Chimpanzees] also have feelings of some kind of spirituality, which is really being amazed at things outside yourself.

—Jane Goodall

I recently watched a video (link below) of Jane Goodall describing the universal dance that chimpanzees do in the presence of waterfalls and storms. Her quote, taken from that video, reminds us that one way of understanding the spirituality of awe and wonder is to realize that it can be invoked by many things and events, both large and small, outside ourselves.

The title—inspired by the song, *My Favorite Things*, from my favorite movie from childhood, *The Sound of Music*—provides just one example of how we all can find awe and wonder in the small everyday things we love.

There is now conclusive research proving that even brief daily exposure to awe, as little as five minutes a day, can quiet the part of our brains that scientists associate with self-criticism, anxiety, rumination, and even depression. Exposure to awe can increase our ability to be open, curious, kind, and can increase our desire to help others in need and inspire us to share, donate, co-operate, and volunteer.

The season of Advent, a season of expectant wonder, provides plentiful opportunities to notice everyday wonders, both small and large. Perhaps adding this as a daily practice could be one powerful way to nourish ourselves heart, mind, body, and soul.

Making It Personal: If you want to commit to a brief daily-ish (more days than not) practice of noticing the things that fill you with awe and wonder, what are some of the everyday things that inspire those feelings in you? You might want to write them in a journal or even on a sticky note to keep close by to remind you of how readily available are those experiences.

Link to short waterfall video with Jane Goodall: <https://bit.ly/3Ix1D4t>

Saturday, December 9, 2023

Believing Is Seeing

by Scott Stoner

*I believe the world is incomprehensibly beautiful—
an endless prospect of magic and wonder.*

—Ansel Adams

When I was growing up, I often heard the idiom “Seeing is believing.” Sometime the same meaning was expressed in different ways, such as, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Recently, I discovered great wisdom when I played with reversing the order of the words. Now I like to say, “Believing is seeing,” and, “I’ll see it when I believe it.”

Focusing on “believing is seeing” has helped me to see more love and wonder in the world because when I believe that life is full of these things, I am inclined to see more of them. The quote by Ansel Adams, famous wilderness photographer, made me think that perhaps he was able to see and capture the wonder of the natural world in such magnificent ways because he believed so deeply it was there just waiting to be discovered.

Our beliefs and attitudes are like soil. If our perspective is “prove to us that love and wonder are all around us,” we are like hard, dry soil. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for the wonder of the world to take root in those inhospitable conditions.

Believing that the world is full of wonder, beauty, love, and hope does not mean that we minimize or ignore suffering. Jesus was born into a broken world full of suffering. Believing in the Light that he brought into the world helps us to see all the ways in which the wonder and love and that Light shine all around us, often in the smallest and most unexpected moments.

Making It Personal: What do you think of the difference between “I’ll believe it when I see it,” and, “I’ll see it when I believe it”? What helps strengthen your belief in love and wonder? How might this enhance an expectation that you will experience these things as you go through the rest of this season of Advent?

The Second Sunday of Advent

December 10, 2023

The Carpenter, the Storyteller, the Healer, and the Cook

by David Dill

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

—from Hebrews 12:1

I was lucky to know all four of my grandparents.

One grandmother was a generous and prolific cook. There were always too many delicious things to eat at her house. Her kitchen was perpetually cooking, and the AM radio perched over the sink was always purring with country hits to keep the mood light.

“Y’all come on” was her sung invitation to the Sunday afternoon dinner table.

My other grandmother was too busy to cook.

She burned toast and swore by the economy of powdered milk. She drove all over town with a bag full of prosthetic breasts that filled the hatchback of her 1976 Toyota Corolla. A survivor of breast cancer in a time when surviving was rare, she spent most of her time after that life-altering event accompanying other women on the road to recovery.

One grandfather loved his Airstream travel trailer and kept meticulous records of the routes they took. In the evenings he monitored local emergencies on a police scanner from a huge swivel easy chair. He ate a bowl of cereal every night before bed. He was an amazing storyteller.

The other grandfather preferred buttermilk and cornbread. He built furniture and toys for me and my brother out of thin air in his basement woodshop. He stocked nails, washers, and screws in reclaimed pickle and peanut butter jars that hung from the rafters overhead. Hundreds of bits of hardware and hinges and oilcans and glues stood

at the ready for his next creation. He hummed and penciled out curlicues on unshaped scraps of plywood that miraculously took form as summer slingshots for each boy, right before our eyes.

The carpenter, the storyteller, the healer, and the cook.

They've all been dead for many years now.

It's funny. The farther away they get in time, the closer I feel their presence. They fed me and taught me and loved me into being. They go before me.

They live on through memory and story and in the gift that is my life. As different as they were, each showed me a way to live more fully.

The way of Jesus is about learning to live and move in the WAS, in the IS, and in the IS-TO-COME. If we can find the courage to respond to the invitation, the dance that happens between those three dimensions of time is a wonder. Every time we break the bread and share the wine of God's meal, we acclaim that all the saints surround us and even join in the singing as we praise God together. The living and the dead.

That's a real gift. A real wonder. We are never, ever alone.

Like that wild and woolly bug-eating baptizer John standing in the Jordan river who goes before Jesus, our saints do too.

The saints.

Who are yours?



Monday, December 11, 2023

Wonder and Stories

by Scott Stoner

All Jesus did that day was tell stories—a long storytelling afternoon. His storytelling fulfilled the prophecy: I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the open things hidden since the world's first day.

—Matthew 13:34-35, The Message

In yesterday's reflection, I experienced the power of the stories David Dill wrote about his four grandparents in the small, intimate details he shared about each. Perhaps his memories inspired you to remember a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, teacher, pastor, coach, mentor, or neighbor. If you were to write a paragraph or two about them, what unique details would you share about them?

Love and wonder are passed on through the power of stories. How is it that we know about the birth of Jesus, that we are preparing to celebrate in just a few weeks? Through the stories of his birth found in the Bible, and the stories that people of faith have handed down. And how do we continue to experience and transmit the love of Christ as a light in our day and age? Again, it is done through the medium of stories.

The Christmas season is filled with stories, movies, and songs—from the secular to the sacred. What are some of your favorites? Is this in part because a particular story, movie, or song is connected to someone you have loved? Do you connect them with a cherished memory of shared stories of love and wonder?

This week we will focus on the relationship between wonder and stories. Stories so often help us remember the One whose love we are preparing to celebrate, and those who have taught us so much about wonder and love through the years.

Making It Personal: Who is a special person, a saint, someone who has gone before you, who taught you about love and wonder? Do you have a favorite Christmas story, movie, or song? If so, how or why does it speak to you about love and wonder?

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Stories of Holy Communion

by Scott Stoner

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

—1 Corinthians 11:23

Christian denominations and churches vary in numerous ways, but one practice that most share is the celebration of Holy Communion. How they celebrate these two rites may differ, but its centrality to the community’s life is the same.

The power of remembering and giving thanks is not only at the center of the services of Holy Communion. We also remember and give thanks in our celebrations with friends and families as we break bread together around the tables in our homes. Love is made present in the stories and memories we share.

Every year I tell the story to friends and family of how my father, who passed away many years ago, made Christmas extra special for my sister and me. Every year when we were kids, he created new and elaborate HO model train boards. In the remembering and retelling of these stories, my father’s spirit and love are once again alive and present in our holiday gatherings.

Sacred stories and sacred acts of remembering connect us and offer us an experience of holy communion—with God, and with the people who have meant so much to us.

Making It Personal: What memorable stories do you remember and share this time of year? What special rituals or practices do you have that connect you with God and with others during the holidays? Do you have any special traditions of food and meals that are important to you? In what ways are they a “holy communion” to you?



Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Storytelling and Wonder

by Robbin Brent

This is our goal as writers, I think; to help others have this sense of—please forgive me—wonder, of seeing things anew, things that can catch us off guard, that break in on our small, bordered worlds. When this happens, everything feels more spacious.

—Anne Lamott

For millennia, storytelling has been a tool we've used to make we sense of our lives and the world around us. In addition to writing, we tell stories through music, art forms like drawing, painting, sculpture, movies, and dance. We also tell stories in the silence, the pauses.

This reminds me of an older friend, a vocal prodigy in her youth, who went decades without singing a single note. Late in life she began singing for small groups of friends, letting each song tell the story of her journey with her voice, the challenges and heartbreak of not feeling worthy of sharing her gift with the world. The first time I heard her, I was in awe of the power and beauty of her voice, but I was more taken with the pauses she allowed into each song. She was not afraid to allow space to resonate between words and notes. These pauses left me breathless, leaning in for more.

Anne Lamott describes a similar spaciousness created when we allow ourselves to wonder, to be willing to lean in and notice once again, as if for the first time. In this season of birth and new life, Advent offers us a contemplative space in which we can listen to old stories in a fresh way, allowing room for new insight and wonder to enter in.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea that storytelling is a way we make sense of our lives, inner and outer? What is one small practice you could try to see your world from a fresh perspective, to allow wonder to reveal what may have been “hidden in plain sight”?

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Our Personal Christmas Pageants

by Scott Stoner

To be surprised, to wonder, is to begin to understand.

—José Ortega y Gasset

My wife and I co-directed the children’s ministry at our church when our children were young, and one of our great joys every year was staging the Christmas Pageant. Our urban church had members coming and going on a regular basis, and so every year we had a different cast of children. Each year was its own delightful experience of holy chaos.

One year, two sisters had dressed up for Halloween in dog costumes their mom had made to match their family’s Border Collie. We had scripted the sisters as angels, but at the last minute, they pleaded to be dogs at the manger scene so that they could wear their Halloween costumes. Moved by their excited faces we responded, “Of course!” That year we may have been the only church to stage a pageant with two dogs, loudly and happily barking on several occasions, as part of the Christmas story.

My wife and I often have reflected that as our family changes and grows every year, our family gatherings grow more and more like those Christmas pageants we used to coordinate. We never know who is going to show up and how they will add their unique voices.

The Christmas story reminds us that there was plenty of holy chaos when Jesus was born. I take comfort in knowing that and also in knowing that however the Christmas pageants of our lives unfold this year, Christ’s love will be present and celebrated—even if someone shows up in their Halloween costume!

Making It Personal: How comfortable are you in dealing with the holy chaos that often accompanies the holidays? How might you be more flexible in dealing with last-minute changes to plans if that is what ends up happening for you?



Friday, December 15, 2023

Once Upon a Time

by Robbin Brent

If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want your children to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.

—Albert Einstein

As we all know from experiences with parents, grandparents, teachers, or other family members, stories have the power to evoke the full range of emotions and imagination. They have the power to connect us by creating a common narrative that entertains, educates, and guides, while filling us with the awe and wonder and magic contained in a time-tested story.

When my oldest grandson was still a toddler, I began to make up simple stories, which seemed to delight him. As he got older, we began taking turns telling stories, which has been a great source of joy for me. Over time, while the stories have remained a bedtime ritual when he spends the night, now we go through a menu of options he's come up with: "Do you want a silly, scary, mystery, adventure, or sad story?" His choices never fail to keep Grandma on her storytelling toes.

At some point, I realized that many of my stories were inspired by the stories I'd internalized from the Bible. The Baptist Sunday School teacher from my childhood never shied away from any story in the Bible. Yet all these years later, I am filled with wonder at how deeply these stories continue to influence my faith and beliefs, and inspire the stories I am passing on to my grandchildren.

Making it Personal: Advent and Christmas are filled with stories we retell every year. What are some of your favorite Advent or Christmas stories? Can you remember other Bible stories or fairytales from your younger years that continue to fill you with strong emotions or memories? Are there any you'd like to spend time revisiting this Advent?

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Stop and Wonder

by Scott Stoner

Practice the pause. Pause before judging. Pause before assuming. Pause before accusing. Pause whenever you're about to react harshly and you'll avoid doing and saying things you'll later regret.

—Lori Deschene

We are a little more than halfway through the season of Advent, and it seems like a natural time to pause, to stop and reflect on our journey so far.

As I pause, what comes to mind is that I don't think I have ever heard someone say, "I want to hurry up and wonder." The much more common phrase that comes to mind is, "I want to stop and wonder." To wonder requires not just a slowing down of our activities, but also the slowing down of our interior lives. Paraphrasing the words of Psalm 46, may we take some time to "be still and wonder."

Pausing or stopping to wonder can also include slowing down the kind of thoughts that interfere with our capacity to wonder. As the quote from Lori Deschene reminds us, sometimes our judgments and assumptions can shut down our ability to wonder.

Our capacity to wonder can be diminished when we hurry up our activities, or when we rush to judgment. Yet when we remember to pause and stop, our practice of wondering is enhanced.

Making It Personal: How could you pause or stop today to practice wonder? Has there ever been a time when you have rushed to judgment and missed the opportunity to be more curious about another person's behavior or motives? What did you learn from that experience and how might that guide you now?

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2023

Practicing Wonder in a Thin Place

by Jess Elfring-Roberts

Always be on the lookout for the presence of wonder.

—E.B. White

One night years ago while I was a camp counselor, I led a group of very excited middle-school campers through an open field as we headed toward our overnight camping spot. The grass was overgrown and the only light to guide us came from the stars and the reflection of the moon.

At one point, I asked the campers to stop and take a moment to be still and watch. After a really brief pause to look around, the kids started talking and laughing, not really engaged in the activity I had invited them to be a part of.

Then something happened. A glow came from the top of one of the grass blades. Then another. Then another. One by one the campers became silent. The field began to shimmer with light dancing from one blade to the next. For the next ten minutes we stood in awed silence as we watched lightning bugs communicating with each other across a vast field.

When we are young, many of us are introduced to Jesus as the light. We have the opportunity to engage in activities, games, and conversations about him as a source of light and love. As we get older, often we forget the playfulness and joy we once experienced of Jesus being the light in our lives. We may feel too vulnerable to play and instead shut that part of ourselves away, hiding our authentic selves. That's why spaces like camp have become so vital to not losing who we are, and whose we are.

That summer night, we could have walked through the field without ever noticing the lightning bugs, but we didn't. We took a moment to be still. And in the stillness, that moment opened up a thin place for our campers.

Many of our camps and conference centers refer to themselves as a thin place. A thin place is a location where the distance between God and Heaven and the Earth is thin. It is a place where deep transformation can happen as we strengthen our personal connection to God. Camps and conference centers around the country know that nature provides a perfect backdrop for folks to slow down, to respond to their personal call to faith, to build deep relationships, and to find safety within community. Being in nature and experiencing the thin place gives us the chance to communicate with God in a different way.

Wonder is one of our greatest gifts. It's what makes us feel alive and in touch with the world around us. When we practice wonder in nature, when we open ourselves up to the mysteries of life contained within a larger story, we can experience transformational change. Sometimes we just need to stop and look for the lightning bugs.



Monday, December 18, 2023

Wonder and Thin Places

by Scott Stoner

The key to the seeker's quest is not in finding just the right piece of holy real estate on which to stand, but rather in so preparing his or her awareness that any space he or she occupies can become thin through faith.

—Steven Charleston

In yesterday's reflection, Jess Elfring-Roberts described thin places as places where we naturally experience wonder. She wrote: "A thin place is a location where the distance between God and Heaven and the Earth is thin. It is a place where deep transformation can happen as we strengthen our personal connection to God."

Most of us can think of a physical space that has been or is a thin place for us. It could be the beach, the woods, a mountain, a camp, a river, our grandparent's home, a church, a park, or a retreat center. Maybe it's a place where we vacation, and perhaps it's our own backyard or a nearby park. In addition to a particular location, thin places can be felt in any experience in life where the veil between ourselves and God is lifted. The quote from Steven Charleston reminds us that our more direct connections with the Holy can and do happen *anywhere*.

As a pastor and psychotherapist, I have had the honor to walk with people in times of significant vulnerability and wonder—the birth of a child, the loss of a loved one, a terminal diagnosis, the joy of a baptism—to name just a few. In these moments, one's vulnerability often creates an opening for a deeper awareness of God's presence.

This week we will focus on the connection between wonder and thin places—be they physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational.

Making It Personal: What is or has been a physical thin place for you? Think about why you associate wonder or awe with this place. What happens there? What is your response to Steve Charleston's insight that any place can "become thin through faith"?

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

The Music of Christmas

by Scott Stoner

*Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us
shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.*

—Psalm 95:1

One of the most memorable parts of the holiday season is its music. What would Christmas celebrations be without songs like *Joy to the World*; *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*; *The First Noel*; *Angels We Have Heard on High*; and *Silent Night*?

Each of us has our own favorite Christmas music or songs. Some of us prefer classical tunes, while others enjoy popular arrangements. Certain songs may be special to us because they remind us of a person we love or a special moment or celebration that included that song. Every time we hear it, we are filled with love for and memories of that person or moment.

Music is a thin place for many, where the distance between themselves and God is narrowed. It has been said that music is the language of the soul and that those who sing, pray twice.

When I served as a full-time pastor of a church, I used to love visiting the elderly members of our church. I always brought my guitar with me on those visits. I vividly remember one Christmas Eve when I visited a 98-year-old woman in a retirement community. She could not get out of bed that day, but asked me to play some Christmas songs on my guitar. I started singing and in a short time, a pop-up gathering of some twenty other residents and staff were all in her room singing “Silent Night” together. It was a moment—a thin place indeed—that I will never forget.

Making It Personal: Do you have a favorite Christmas song or two that evokes special memories? What other songs or kinds of music help you feel closer to God? How could you use music this Advent season to feel closer to God?



Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Thresholds and Thin Places

by Robbin Brent

At any time you can ask yourself: “At which threshold am I now standing? At this time in my life, what am I leaving? Where am I about to enter?”... A threshold is not simply a boundary, but it is a frontier that cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up.

—John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*

As I reflected on Advent and thin places, one threshold memory surfaced. It was a sweltering August afternoon, and I was more than a little cranky, hot, and resentful that we were spending the day doing something I really didn’t want to be doing. While deciding which of the many paths to take on the 500-acre Meher Baba Center—a spiritual oasis in an ocean of commerce—a woman in a bright yellow rain slicker materialized and greeted us with, “The abode is open today. Would you like to go in?” My companion said “yes!” immediately and so we set off, following her on a wooded trail until she stopped beside a tall wooden fence and said, “Here it is.” I turned toward the opening in the fence, and then turned back to thank her but she was somehow already gone.

As soon as I walked through the gate, I fell to my knees. My hands came up in a prayer position and I began weeping. There are no words to describe this experience, but perhaps awe and wonder are a good place to start. I had crossed a threshold into a thin place I did not know was there. I don’t know how long I stayed in that position, but when I got to my feet, my heart was wide open and at ease. I joined with many others who had crossed that threshold into the presence of an energy, of love, that was so much bigger than us, yet included us in its embrace.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a threshold experience in your life? What are you noticing during this threshold time of Advent in your own spiritual journey?

Thursday, December 21, 2023

True Wonder and Joy

by Scott Stoner

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep
this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.*

—Book of Common Prayer

Today is the date of the winter solstice, meaning tonight will be the longest night of the year. Related to this solstice, many churches will be offering a “longest night” service this week, with the intention of ministering especially to those experiencing grief and loss during the holidays.

I wrote about grief in my reflection on December 5, and today I want to reflect again on grief, but this time with the insight that grief can be a thin place for many people.

This is the time of year I miss my grandmother tremendously. Every year I could not wait for her to come and stay with us for the two weeks before Christmas. As I open myself to grief, I also open my heart to memories of her love and how she modeled profound faith and resilience after having experienced some profound losses early in her life. This grief is indeed a thin place for me, a place of deep connection with my grandmother, a place where grief and love join with God’s love and wonder, which she embodied for me. Two gifts that continue to inspire and guide me to this day.

The prayer above is from the *Book of Common Prayer* service of Compline, or Night Prayer. Here is the conclusion of that end-of-the-day prayer: “Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. *Amen.*”

Making It Personal: Have you ever experienced grief as a thin place, a time when you have felt or even now feel God’s love? What happened to you or for you during that time? When you pray the prayer from Compline, what phrase or line most speaks to you?



Friday, December 22, 2023

Birth, Wonder, and Thin Places

by Robbin Brent

*And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”*

—Luke 1:46-49

Scott Stoner’s writing earlier about the experience of wonder in the presence of new life brought to mind a thin place I recently entered as I held my newest grandson just moments after his birth. In the midst of the chaotic bustle of medical staff, equipment, noise, and bright lights, the moment I felt his weight and warmth, time stood still and everything receded as I fell into the presence of this new being.

Looking at his tiny beautiful features, I was awash in awe, wonder, and profound gratitude for his safe arrival. I love to hold babies because I imagine I can see God in their gaze. They were looking at God just moments before they arrived, and the smell of heaven still lingers on their skin.

As we draw closer to the birth of Jesus, we are bearing witness to Mary’s anticipation of the imminent birth of her beloved baby. And even in the midst of all the chaos, confusion, and uncertainty she is facing, I imagine that she will see God in the gaze of her newborn baby.

Making it Personal: When you reflect on wonder and thin places, what experiences and memories come to mind? Does the idea of Mary giving birth to the savior of the world in a manger inspire any new ideas about how God can make any place a thin place full of wonder?

Saturday, December 23, 2023

The Lord Is in This Place

by Scott Stoner

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”

—Genesis 28:16

I have, and know friends who have, traveled to places like the Camino de Santiago in Spain, drawn to the sites because we feel the nearness of God there. As wonderful as these faraway places are, we have learned in our reflections this week that God can be experienced in places quite ordinary and close to home. In the book of Genesis, for example, we read that Jacob experienced God’s presence in a dream at Bethel, a site in the pastoral mountains of ancient Samaria, causing him to proclaim, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”

I have nothing against traveling to faraway places to experience the Holy. However, Jacob’s words remind me that God is everywhere, always close to me, always inhabiting the ordinary places of my life, and like Jacob, often I don’t recognize it. Jesus sometimes talks about “having eyes to see and ears to hear.” With such eyes and ears, all places can be thin and holy.

Many of us will gather with friends and families in our homes and communities of faith over the next few days. May our eyes and ears, during these days and always, be open to the presence of God so that we, like Jacob, can realize that, surely, God is in these places.

Making It Personal: Have you traveled to a faraway place where you experienced the nearness of God? Is there a place closer to home that is a thin place for you? How might you best prepare your heart and soul so that you have “eyes to see and ears to hear” the presence of God in any gatherings you will be a part of over the next few days?

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2023

Quaking at the Sight

by Scott Stoner

*Silent night, holy night.
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing, Alleluia!
Christ, the Savior is born!*
—Joseph Mohr, *Silent Night*

Today is unique because it is both the Fourth Sunday of Advent *and* it's Christmas Eve. Churches will hold services in the morning to conclude the observance of Advent, and then afternoon and evening services to celebrate the birth of Jesus. What a rich and glorious day it is!

Singing *Silent Night* by candlelight is a memorable part of many Christmas Eve services. I have always loved the words from the second verse where it describes how the shepherds were “quaking at the sight” because of all that they were experiencing. To quake is to vibrate; the shepherds were no doubt vibrating with curiosity, awe, and wonder at the news of Jesus’ birth.

This morning and evening vibrate, too, with the wonder of God as made manifest in Mary’s faith and courage described in Luke, the birth of Jesus, and the reverent response of the shepherds. The vibrations of what transpired almost two thousand years continue to be felt throughout the world today. On this holy night, may we continue to quake at the sight.

Making It Personal: Do you have special memories or traditions related to Christmas Eve that have filled you with wonder, so as to even make you quake? Are there any traditions that you would like to change or renew this year?

Christmas Day

December 25, 2023

Receiving the Gift

by Robbin and Scott

*And wonders of His love,
and wonders of His love,
and wonders, wonders of His love.*

—Isaac Watts, *Joy to the World*

Merry Christmas! May you be filled with the wonder of the good news of Jesus' birth. May you be filled today and every day with the "wonders of His love."

We are so grateful for the path we have traveled together through Advent. In the first week, we focused on the connection between wonder and love. In week two, we concentrated on the power of stories to convey wonder, and that there is no better story to capture the presence of God's love in the world than the story of Jesus' birth. And this last week, we focused on how thin places help us to feel the nearness of God.

A story is told of a children's Christmas Pageant where the young boy playing the role of the innkeeper said something quite memorable off script. At the point in the pageant when Mary and Joseph came to the innkeeper to ask if there is room for them in the inn, the boy paused for a long time and finally said, "Yes, somehow I will find a way to make room for you."

The surprised congregation and other parent participants tried to move on as though nothing was wrong, as they assumed the frightened child had forgotten his lines. Asked later about his response, he said, "It just didn't feel right to say no and I just couldn't bring myself to say there was no room for Jesus in the inn—even if that was what the script said!"

Our hope and prayer is that by focusing on wonder this season of Advent, we have all prepared more room in the “inn of our hearts” to welcome the wonder and love of God, as made incarnate in Jesus.

It has been a joy to walk with you through this season of Advent and to arrive together at our celebration of Jesus’ birth. May you continue to be filled with the “wonders of His love.”

Scripture, Quotes, Prayers & Practices for Advent

Scripture*

As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

—Mark 9:15

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

—Luke 1:41

Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.

—Psalm 40:5

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.

—Psalm 89:5

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

—Isaiah 9:6

Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

—John 4:48

*These Scripture are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.

*Blessed GOD, Israel's God,
 the one and only wonder-working God!
 Blessed always his blazing glory!
 All earth brims with his glory.
 Yes and Yes and Yes.*

—Psalm 72:19-19, The Message

*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were
 being done by the apostles.*

—Acts 2:43

*The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul
 as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through
 them among the Gentiles.*

—Acts 15:12

*By the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God,
 so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully
 proclaimed the good news of Christ.*

—Romans 15:19

Quotes*

Look at everything always as though you were seeing it either for the first or last time: Thus is your time on earth filled with glory.

—Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.

—Rachel Carson

And in that sense prayer becomes a way within which you cultivate curiosity and the sense of wonder so that you know I'll be returning back to this and can say hello, tomorrow, to something that I wouldn't have even known about today. And that's how I understand prayer, in that way.

—Pádraig Ó Tuama

Every day has something in it whose name is forever.

—Mary Oliver, from the poem *Everything That Was Broken*

A man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A mature sense of wonder does not need the constant titillation of the sensational to keep it alive. It is most often called forth by a confrontation with the mysterious depth of meaning at the heart of the familiar and quotidian. Rare birds—the scarlet tanagers and indigo bunting of experience—do upon occasion delight us, but a mature sense of wonder may be evoked by starlings and English sparrows.

—Sam Keen, *Apology for Wonder*

*These quotes are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.

*I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all
my fellow creatures, pulsing with your life;
as a tiny seed you sleep in what is small
and in the vast you vastly yield yourself.*

*The wondrous game that power plays with Things
is to move in such submission through the world:
groping in roots and growing thick in trunks
and in treetops like a rising from the dead.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke, from *I find you, Lord, in all Things and in all*, English version by Stephen Mitchell

*Look, we all have a thirst for wonder. It's a deeply human quality.
Science and religion are both bound up with it. What I'm saying
is, you don't have to make stories up, you don't have to exaggerate.
There's wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature's a lot
better at inventing wonders than we are.*

—Carl Sagan, *Contact*

*Wonder is the natural human response to something overwhelming that
takes us beyond words. Wonder is above all, what we experience in
the encounter with God in Jesus Christ.*

—Justin Welby, The Archbishop of Canterbury,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRu-8fw2-pg>

Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

—Socrates

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.

—Emerson

*Yes, and yet here we are, looking at the evening sun with our hearts
expanding knowing there is more we feel than can ever be said in
words. Here we are in a moment of awe and wonder, and I am a part
of you, and you are a part of me.*

—Carrie Newcomer

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years ... the alienation from the sources of our strength.

—Rachel Carson

In everything, love wonder.

—Saint Francis de Sales

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

—Mary Oliver

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

—William Blake

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

—W.B. Yeats

Prayers*

*Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come!
 Darkness covers the earth and its people,
 but the radiance of God's Light
 burns away its shadows,
 illuminates the smallest corner,
 and heralds in the start
 of a new dawn,
 where hearts no longer fear,
 souls might be set free,
 and sister shall follow brother,
 nation shall follow nation,
 and kings and princes bow down in awe
 before the one who comes to reign.
 Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come! [Amen.]*

—Inspired by Isaiah 60:1-3

*God of wonders,
 you show us your beauty in all created things.
 Help us to pay attention:
 to the taste of the ocean on our lips,
 the warmth of the sun on our hands,
 the song of birds in the morning and evening,
 the fragrance of the earth after rain,
 and to the star that guides us.
 Creator God,
 we stand in awe of all that you have made.
 Fill our hearts with gratitude
 for every good gift, great and small,
 that feeds and forms us,
 inviting and enabling us
 to become people who are fully alive
 in your amazing grace. AMEN.*

—Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 2021 Social Justice prayer card

*These prayers are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.

Alleluia!

God of the Cosmos, your love reaches beyond space and time. We are astonished by your vast creation—innumerable galaxies surrounded by dark matter, elegant structures and staggering variety, the interplay of matter and energy, the pull of gravity and the speed of light—all showing your wisdom and glory, O God! We are dust and stardust, made in your image. We are part of the creation you are making new. Let our awe increase, like your ever-expanding universe, until we find ourselves lost in wonder, love, and praise, through Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega. Amen.

—The Book of Common Worship

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. [Amen.]

—Book of Common Prayer

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, beseeching you that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, now and for ever. Amen.

—Book of Common Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us forgiveness of sin, and have raised us to a new life of grace. Sustain us O Lord. Give us an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. [Amen.]

—Book of Common Prayer

Together We Pray:

*O Gracious, gentle Spirit of Love,
Your energy permeates the Universe,
Igniting Earth with
Your Goodness, Truth and Beauty.
Open our minds and hearts
To a deeper awareness
Of our interconnectedness with You,
Each other and all creation.
May we experience
Your unique presence
Within the sacred web of creation. [Amen.]*

—Author Unknown, from *The Spirit of God is Always with Us at This Time, in This Place*

*May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received and pass on the love
that has been given to you.
May you be content knowing you are a child of God.
Let this presence settle into your bones and allow your soul the
freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.
It is there for each and every one of us. [Amen.]*

—Theresa of Lisieux

*Holy One, we are grateful to be together in this holy season of Advent.
We pray that we might be alert to the possibilities of the movement
of your spirit in us and among us as we listen together and share
together about our lives in this season of coming new life.*

*We thank you for the wonder and the mystery of this time, which
somehow reminds us that possibility can never be fully known or
expected.*

*Perhaps the most important thing is to remain devoted to you and as
alert as possible. We offer ourselves to that stance in this holy season.*

*Thank you for this part of Jesus' story and also the knowledge of his
unfolding life, which was always alert to you.
In the many names and ways we pray, Amen.*

—Ann Dean and Robbin Brent

Contemplative Prayer Practices

Receive & Release Prayer Practice

This prayer practice focuses on two words: *receive* and *release*. Here are some simple instructions for getting started.

- First, find a comfortable sitting position and begin to take deep, slow breaths.
- After you have relaxed and settled into the gentle rhythm of your breathing, begin to say the word *receive* silently in your mind each time you inhale, and the word *release* as you exhale. So, it's *receive* as you inhale, and *release* as you exhale. These two words will also help to focus your mind whenever it begins to wander.
- As you repeat the word *receive*, imagine yourself receiving what God has to offer you and wants to give to you right now.
- As you repeat the word *release*, imagine yourself releasing to God what it is you need to let go of at this time.
- Start by doing this practice for three to five minutes (it can be helpful to set a quiet timer at the beginning).
- If you have a particular prayer concern, you can use this practice to assist you in finding peace and guidance regarding your concern. Bring the concern to mind as you begin the “Receive, Release” practice. You may even find that you are given a different word or phrase that comes to mind to use in place of *receive* or *release*. You might, for example, find yourself mindfully repeating “patience,” “kindness,” or “forgiveness” on your in-breath and perhaps something like “control,” “anger,” or “judgment” on the out-breath.

Loving-Kindness Prayer Practice

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Each time you say this prayer, first think of those you love. Then, as you repeat the prayer, you may want to bring in those you find challenging to love right now, and those you have never met.

Examen Prayer Practice

A way of paying attention as we listen for God. The Daily Examen is an ancient and powerful way of reflecting on the day so that we can more clearly identify how and where God has shown up in our lives and where God may be guiding us. Following is a brief description of the practice.

At the end of the day, sit quietly for a few minutes, seeking God's presence. Then:

- Remember times in the day when you felt most alive, and thank God for those moments.
- Remember instances when you felt the least grateful, and offer those with thanks to God.
- Notice times in the day when you experienced being aligned with God's purpose for you, and give thanks for those times.
- Notice any moments when you felt far from living out God's purpose for your life, and offer those to God.
- Ask God to help you live ever more closely to God's plan and purpose for you tomorrow, and then turn everything over to God to hold while you rest.

—For more resources, a good place to start is the Ignatian Spirituality's website: bit.ly/38De8gc

Rosebush Examen for Children* (of all ages)

In this approach to learning the Examen, the authors suggested asking children to picture a rosebush. However we found that metaphor really helpful for ourselves and others either new to the practice, or too tired at the end of a long day to remember all the steps in their proper order. Perhaps it might be helpful for you too.

Here are the instructions: Picture a rosebush, which has roses, thorns, and buds. Then think of them this way:

- Roses = joyful thing or things from the day.
- Thorns = a painful or challenging experience.
- Buds = possibilities for growth (hope).

What roses, thorns, and buds did your day or week hold?

*From *New Directions for Holy Questions* by Claire Brown and Anita Peebles, shared in *Seasons of Wonder* by Bonnie Smith Whitehouse, pp. 181-182

Welcoming Prayer Practice

When used consistently, this prayer practice has the capacity to quickly and effectively dislodge us from our habitual reactions, emotional patterns, and limiting comfort zones. Using it can help move us through challenging or painful experiences, times of disturbed emotion or anguish, and even moments where unhelpful control tendencies and self-inflation takes us over.

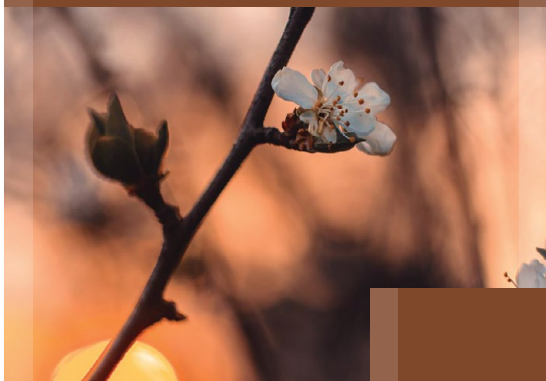
Three steps for the Welcoming Prayer Practice:

1. **Focus or “sink in”** to become aware and physically present to the particular experience or upset without analyzing or judging yourself or the situation. Don’t try to change anything at this stage—just stay present.
2. **Welcome and lightly name** the response that is being triggered by the difficult situation, such as “fear” or “anger” or “pain.” Acknowledge the response as sensation, and recognize that in this moment, if the experience is not being rejected or repressed, it can be endured. Ever so gently, begin to say “welcome,” such as “welcome fear,” “welcome resentment,” etc. Though this step is counter-intuitive and the impulse is most likely to try to push away the unpleasant emotion, Cynthia Bourgeault explains: “By welcoming it instead, you create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. By embracing the thing you once defended yourself against or ran from, you are actually disarming it, removing its power to hurt you or chase you back into your smaller self.”
3. **Transition to a “letting go,”** whereby the intensity of the situation can recede. This enables the natural fluidity of sensation to come and then go.

—For more on the Welcome Prayer/Practice, go to: <https://bit.ly/2Sqtj0R>

© Brújula de Vida

Vivir una buena Cuaresma en el 2024

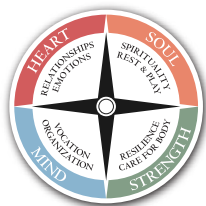


*Practicando el perdón con
el corazón, alma, fuerzas...*

Un recurso para esta estación creado por
de Brújula de Vida (Living Compass)

VIVIR UNA BUENA CUARESMA 2024

A Spanish Lent guide
with completely
original content.

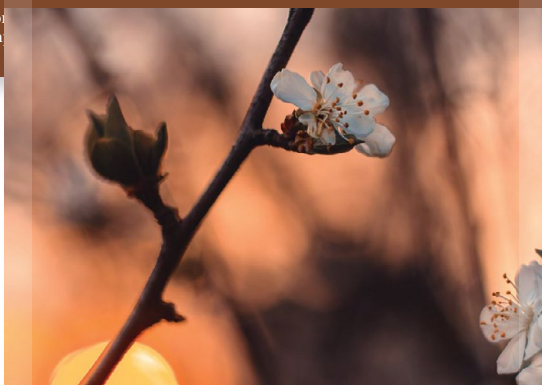


LIVING WELL THROUGH LENT 2024

*Practicing Forgiveness
with All Your Heart,
Soul, Strength,
and Mind*

© LIVING COMPASS

Living Well Through Lent 2024



*Practicing Forgiveness with All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

For more information, visit LivingCompass.org/Lent

Living Well Through Advent 2023

*Practicing Wonder with All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

Living Compass is delighted to join you on your journey through Advent. Designed for use for individual reflection or for group study, this 50-page devotional provides a foundation for seeking a deeper experience of Advent, an experience that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

Includes reflections from:

Robbin Brent
David Dill
Jess Elfring-Roberts
Regan Schutz
Scott Stoner

Available in print, PDF, and electronic editions.

We offer a free downloadable companion Facilitator Guide.

Living Compass is delighted to join you on your journey through Advent.

Also available:

Vivir un Buen Adviento en el 2023: Practicando la admiración con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente—a Spanish Advent guide with completely original content. Available in print, PDF, and electronic editions.



To learn more or to order printed English or Spanish devotionals, visit: livingcompass.org/Advent
Questions? Contact us: info@livingcompass.org