

Rediscover the Hope, Peace, and Joy of Advent



MERRY & BRIGHT



JULIE FISK • KENDRA ROEHL • KRISTIN DEMERY





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Merry and Bright: Rediscover the Hope, Peace, and Joy of Advent

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Introduction



AS KIDS, MY SISTER KRISTIN AND I (KENDRA) and our family would drive from Minnesota to North Dakota every year to spend several days over Christmas break with our grandparents. Since we only saw them once or twice a year, we always looked forward to the several-hour drive to be with them. Their little white house on Main Street was filled with so many things we loved: treats like fudge and lefse, Grandpa Hans's windup toys, hours of playing Yahtzee, and time spent singing Christmas carols accompanied by Grandma Jo on the piano.

One year, a massive snowstorm came through on the day we were supposed to leave our home. My parents were concerned. They were unsure when the roads would be clear enough to drive on safely but didn't want us to miss the holidays we had planned for so long.

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We finally were able to pack up and leave a day or so later, making our way slowly through the freshly fallen snow. We pulled up in my grandparents' driveway many hours later than we'd hoped.

As a child, I remember feeling mildly disappointed to leave later than expected, but the anticipation of gifts, fun treats, Christmas lights, and games with family consumed my mind. My parents carried the stress of preparing food to bring with us, packing everything in the car, and hoping they hadn't forgotten anything. What was magical for me was stressful for them.

It's a simple example, but most of us can relate to the good feelings we attach to the Advent season being underlaid by moments of strife or stress. We long for a joyful Christmas but struggle to reconcile our idealized visions with our messy reality. As we prepare for Jesus' arrival, how can we embrace the season in a way that offers hope and good cheer rather than tension and stress? And how do we include others—in our neighborhood or community—who may need the same comfort that Advent promises?

The holidays have always been a source of stress for many of us, and that seems to be increasing. In fact, a recent poll from the American Psychiatric Association indicated that 31 percent of Americans expected to be more stressed over the holiday season than in the previous year—a 9 percent increase. We can face many significant stressors this time of year, from affording meals and gifts to traveling and worrying about having to talk politics. Those concerns are

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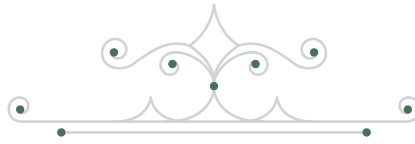
amplified by grief, family dynamics, and the hard-to-measure feeling that Christmas “should” be joyful—but often is not.¹

Jesus wants us to show up on his doorstep, unvarnished and unafraid. He does not turn us away because of the messiness of our lives; instead, he encourages us to step into his light and experience his love. Through this Advent devotional, the three of us—Kristin, Julie, and Kendra—will uncover what it truly means to embrace the promise of Advent. As you read along with us, we’ll discover together what the expectancy of Jesus’ birth means. We’ll be encouraged to find the hope, comfort, love, and joy that is available to each of us, and we’ll see ways to extend that same hope to those around us.

Each day’s reading will invite you to rediscover the season’s joys by addressing internal struggles while shifting your focus outward to your family, your neighbors, and the larger community. We will gain hope and healing as we invite others in, find simple joys, and prepare room for Jesus in the landscape of our lives.

If, like us, you’ve struggled to reconcile all the stress with the fun and joy of the season, we offer an alternative—one in which we still take into consideration the difficult aspects, making adjustments where possible, but give to God what’s beyond our control. As we do so, we will find that merry and bright is still within reach for each of us at Advent.





PRE-DECEMBER

Meeting Him in the Mess

Because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born.

LUKE 2:4-6



I KNEW IT WAS INEVITABLE. As soon as I finished placing the activities into our family calendar, I had all the proof I needed that December would be busy. Nearly every day was filled with appointments, notes, and to-dos that covered the calendar square and wound along the edge of the page.

And although I knew the month included good and fun things, I secretly dreaded it.

A week into December, I broke down after dinner.

"I'm already tired," I admitted to my husband as I wiped down the counters. He paused and turned from washing dishes to look at me.

“What do you mean, Kendra?” he asked.

“The month has only begun,” I continued, “but already we have things scheduled almost every night, and it doesn’t stop until Christmas. We’re only a few days in, and I’m already behind on our Advent devotional reading with the kids. Our house is messy, I haven’t finished decorating, and the thought of squeezing cookie baking and gift wrapping into the already full calendar stresses me out. In the grand scheme of things, it’s not a big deal to feel a bit behind—there are far worse things—but it just feels like a lot.”

“You want something to change,” my husband said. It wasn’t a question. I nodded, hopeful that he would have a solution. “Honestly? Me too.”

“None of this is bad,” I acknowledged, “but is this really what we want this season to be about? I want to do some fun things with the kids, but I don’t want to lose Jesus in the middle of all of that. Is there a way to somehow find a good balance for our family?”

“I think so,” he said, his voice thoughtful. “Let’s make a plan.”

That night, after putting our kids to bed, we pulled out our monthly calendar and began to reevaluate our schedule. We decided which events and obligations we wanted to keep and which we could let go of. And we planned how to incorporate the activities that were important to us and let go of the ones that weren’t really necessary.

I went to bed feeling a little better. Although the weeks that followed weren’t perfect—we still fell behind on our devotional

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readings, and our house was at times disorganized—I knew we were being intentional about focusing on the things that mattered during Advent. Anticipating Jesus’ arrival, celebrating the season, and spending time with loved ones while also making room to be generous and invite others in—those were the activities we prioritized. Life was still untidy and imperfect, and I felt frazzled some days, but that was okay. God is still present even when our plans don’t proceed as we envisioned. He is still moving. Still arriving. And he doesn’t mind a little mess.

Our experience that year reminds me of the first Advent. The months leading up to the birth of Jesus were messy and unexpected, to say the least, as was the birth itself: the fact that he was born miles and miles from home—not even in a house, but in a stable. And that he was born among animals. Far from family. Placed in a manger filled with hay. Surrounded by shepherds who’d just come from the fields to see the baby born to be the Savior of the world. This scene was not what most of us would plan for or anticipate, yet that is what God chose to do, and none of it was unexpected to him.

If God was willing to come into the world in such a messy, unforeseen way, I don’t believe he’s put off by or disappointed in the messiness of our lives. In fact, maybe that’s just the place he likes to show up the most. When we aren’t perfectly coiffed but instead muddied by the cares of this world, when all we’re holding is a glimmer of hope that the promise of Advent will bring

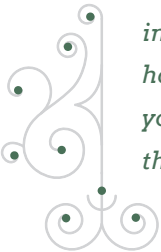
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something meaningful, wonderful, and joyful to our lives—that’s his favorite time to meet us. In the mess.

Because of this truth, we don’t have to hide or put on a show. We can be our whole selves, smooth and rough edges alike. He sees it all and loves us anyway. He is our peace, our comfort, even our joy.

As you prepare your heart and home this December, don’t be afraid to get honest with God. Whether you are going into the Christmas season excited or trepidatious, he sees and knows your needs. Even now, he is near, and he desires nothing more than to meet you in the middle of your mess. The reality is that this balancing act will resurface every Christmas season. Life still moves quickly, and we must be intentional about making it what we want it to be. But we can trust that each year, as we continue to bring all of ourselves and our lives to Jesus, he will meet us once again.

Lord, thank you that you don't expect perfection from us. You see our humanity and embrace us in our imperfections. As we begin the Advent season, may we wait expectantly for your arrival. May we look for all the big and small ways you meet us in the coming days—in our joy and happiness but also in our hard moments and busyness. May we remember to lean on your peace, comfort, and love this month and give ourselves the same grace that you extend to us. Amen.





Reflections:

1. Read Luke 2:1-20. Notice all the unexpected twists and messiness of Jesus' arrival. How does this comfort you as you consider your life circumstances?
2. Spend time being honest with God. Bring your stressors, fears, and joys to him. Ask him to help you let go of the cares that weigh you down, and open your heart to accept the peace he offers in this busy time of year.
3. How can you intentionally keep Jesus at the forefront of this Advent season? Consider areas in which you may need to make changes for this to happen.

Embracing Advent:

Look at your calendar for December and ask God to show you the activities you should keep and the ones you could let go of in the coming days. Decide for yourself, or have a conversation with your family so you are all in agreement.

