

Advent in Plain Sight

A Devotion through Ten Objects

JILL J. DUFFIELD

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Introduction

Advent, that liturgical season marked by eager waiting, often brings with it a frenzy of busyness. Cultural expectations around Christmas invade our church Advent rituals. Getting overwhelmed by events and activities tempts us to forget that we are, in fact, preparing for both Jesus' birth and Christ's return. We lose sight of the holy in our midst, distracted by commercialism or an unexamined sense of what the season is supposed to entail. Imagine if instead disciples of Jesus Christ entered Advent with a hope and anticipation of seeing the divine at work all around and within us. Imagine if Christians took Advent as an invitation to slow down, rather than speed up, to ponder instead of purchase, to look for God in all things even as we wait for the Word made flesh to appear.

Having the eyes to see and the ears to hear the holy in the middle of daily demands and anxiety-provoking times takes an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. This book is a prayerful attempt to invite readers to an

intentional perspective that seeks to see God in all things in the hope of discerning divine possibility in what at first glance appears to be utterly mundane. Scripture bears witness to the fact that our God chooses to work through all creation, through worldly, unnoteworthy things and people. Moses hears God's voice in a burning bush. Balaam's donkey speaks. Jesus says that if people keep silent, the rocks will cry out. A star guides the magi and on-duty shepherds are the first to get word of the Messiah's birth.

Could this be the Advent we remember Immanuel, God with us, in all places, reminded of God's presence, providence, and power by everyday objects that point us to the salvation story of which we are a part? Being mindful of the divine in the midst of our living takes intentionality and focus; each section of this book encourages readers to pay attention to a particular object, allowing that tangible item to point to the sometimes ineffable work of God in our lives and world. Noticing the everyday things we encounter as we go about our day and connecting them to Scripture and the triune God, we become aware of Immanuel, God with us, past, present, and future.

May this Advent season be one where your anticipation of Jesus' birth and your expectation of Christ's return allow you to see God in all things and at all times. My prayer is that this book helps you feel surrounded by the love of the One who came to save the world.

Jill Duffield
October 2020

First Week of Advent

Gates

Sunday

Genesis 28:1–5, 10–22

*And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place!
This is none other than the house of God, and this is the
gate of heaven.”*

Genesis 28:17

Gates of Heaven

Jacob sets out on a journey at the behest of his father: Go to your mother’s father and take a wife, a wife from within the family, a wife who is a member of and approved by your people. Isaac blesses his son Jacob, and Jacob obediently sets out on his way toward Haran. He stops for the night, finds a stone for a pillow, and settles in to sleep only to have his slumber disrupted by a vivid dream of a ladder bridging the divide between heaven and earth. Angels come and go, up and down, but then the Lord comes and stands right beside Jacob, the divide between holy and human virtually nonexistent. God’s words echo Isaac’s, another comingling of divine and secular. Isaac asks God to make Jacob “a company of peoples” and

grant him the land God gave to Abraham. God seems to have heard Isaac's prayer but goes a lot further, saying Jacob will indeed possess the land, but he will not only be a company of peoples, he and his offspring will be the means through which God will bless all companies of people. Further, God will keep Jacob throughout the entire journey. No wonder Jacob wakes up fearful and exuberant, declaring, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

This is not just a "thin place" where the barrier between God and humans is nominal, this is a place where the gate to the heavenly kingdom has been flung open wide and the Lord God has walked through it and come for a night visit. God, in this story, sits at Jacob's bedside. Imagine God coming into your room in the middle of the night, sitting beside you, and giving you such a mind-blowing word. *You* will be the conduit for my blessing not just to your family or your community or your people but to no less than everyone in all creation. When God chooses to open the gate to our hearts and heads and homes and walk through, the flood gates of divine blessings open too.

In Ephesians 3:20, we read that Christ's "power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." The ultimate opening of the gates of heaven, of God come to earth, the incarnation, continues God's promise of blessedness and blessing. As we prepare for the birth of Jesus and the return of Christ, all around us God opens the gates of heaven, breaches whatever barriers we erect, puts in place not just ladders between the divine and the dailiness of our lives, but comes and sits beside us, blessing us and making of us a blessing, not to just a company of peoples, but to all the families of the earth. This Advent we can trust God's

promise never to leave us and to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine through us because with Christ's coming, no matter where we are is no less than the gate of heaven.

Questions for Reflection

1. As you enter this season of Advent, where do you sense God's close presence? How can you invite an awareness of God with you wherever you are?
2. Where do you encounter gates? What are they keeping in or keeping out? What is their purpose? When you see a gate this week, imagine God breaching it and seeking out those on the other side of it. Imagine what God might say to those on either side of the gate.
3. How is it that you are blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth?

Prayer for the Day

Lord who knows no bounds and whose blessing is for all the families of the earth, we too often truncate your expansive grace, basking in your care for us without extending your compassion to others. Forgive our limited vision and diminished imagination. As we prepare for Christ's coming, we yearn for hearts to welcome him, hands to point to him, mouths to speak of him, and minds that are conformed to him. Open our eyes to see your angels all around us. Visit us in our vulnerability and open any gate that seeks to keep you at bay from any aspect of our lives. Amen.

Monday

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:6–9

Your Gates

Focus. Paying attention. Taking notice. How elusive are such qualities in our culture and in our lives? How easily are we distracted by many things? The ping of a text, the pull of our social media accounts, the to-do list constantly running in our minds? My prayer as of late has been only this: Lord, what do you want me to notice today? Simplistic, I suppose, and yet difficult to do even with the best of intentions. So prone am I to distraction and fixating on the trivial or negative that I have taped an Annie Dillard quote to my desk, visible to me as I work. In her

book *The Writing Life*, she says, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.”* Where we direct our attention is often where we put our energy and subsequently how we spend our lives. God seems to understand this aspect of our human finitude, giving the Israelites very specific instructions on not only where to focus, but hacks for how to sustain it.

God tells God’s people to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might. We know this commandment and the one like unto it: to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Judaism, Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is known as the Shema, the oldest fixed prayer in Judaism, recited in the morning and the evening, “when you lie down and when you rise.” God explicitly tells God’s people that their focus should be on God, intently, completely, always on God. Recite this truth, but also write this truth, affix it on your person and on your property. Use tefillin or phylacteries for the body and a mezuzah for your door. Keep focus. On God. Always.

As we begin our Advent journey, where is our focus? On whom or what are we fixated? If we are not attentive to loving God with all our heart, soul, and might, all of our other priorities will be disordered. Mezuzah means “doorpost” and observant Jews place within these small containers the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9, 11:13–21) and affix them to the doorframe of their homes—a visible and tangible reminder of where, and on whom, to focus. As we come and go this Advent season, crossing countless thresholds, could we allow those “gates” to remind us to focus? Every time we come in or go out of a room or a

*Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 32.

building, could those entries and exits give us pause and invite us to pray to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might—and our neighbors as ourselves? Our focus on our love for our Lord will surely open the gates of our compassion for everyone we encounter on the other side of those doorways. Our intentional focus on the Lord will help us to let go of many distractions and enable us to see all that God wants us to notice today, enable us to live our days and our lives in ways that are pleasing in God’s sight.

Questions for Reflection

1. Where do you find your focus fixating? What do you fail to see as a result?
2. What are the “gates,” the thresholds you cross every day? What do you want to notice on the other side of them?
3. Are there particular Bible verses you might write down and affix to a place you will see daily to help remind you where, and on whom, to focus?

Prayer for the Day

Lord God, our attention wanders and we often find ourselves focused on ourselves or the faults of others or on the trivial, anything but your glory and grace. We easily forget that you are the center of our lives and creator of all that is, seen and unseen. As we prepare for Christ’s coming, call us back to the one thing we truly have need of: You. As we come and go this day remind us of your presence and your providence that we might worship you, love you, with all our heart, soul, and might, and see all the beauty and truth you reveal to us as a result. Amen.

Tuesday

Psalm 118

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

Psalm 118:19

Gates of Righteousness

The Lord's steadfast love endures forever, so goes the refrain of this Psalm of victory. The proclamation of the Lord's steadfast love begins and ends this hymn and is repeated three times in between. The thread woven through recollections of perilous circumstances and real and present threats is the Lord's steadfast love. Somehow the psalmist still sees the love of God even when "severely punished." Of course, this confident cry comes in hindsight, after the victory is won and the people are set in a broad, safe place. One wonders what the writer called out to God when the battle raged and escape appeared all but impossible.

Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Hence, that

oft repeated idiom, hindsight is 20/20. We walk through most of life's gates without much knowledge of what lies on the other side of them, not really. We marry and bring children in the world without any way of knowing the detailed ramifications of those decisions. We move or choose or are forced to change jobs. We speak or write a word only to discover after it is let loose in the universe its implications and reception. It is all well and good to sing of God's steadfast love and salvation after we land on the other side of a sickness or divorce or pandemic or lay-off, but what about when we are smack dab in the middle of life's upheavals?

Psalm 118, verse 24, is surely one of the most familiar of verses in the Bible, "This is the day that the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." The unequivocal nature of this statement challenges us to declare it regardless of present circumstance. This day, whatever it holds, whatever we encounter within whatever walls we find ourselves, is, in fact, a day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it. This day, no matter the content of it, is permeated and bookended by the Lord's steadfast love. Living in this truth and promise prompts us to praise God and creates the gates of righteousness in every place and time.

Remember, however, the middle of this psalm of victory, the angry, uncomfortable part, verses that contain words like "distress" and being "surrounded on every side." Sentiments like being "pushed hard" and "punished severely." Those singing this psalm rejoice from a place of deep pain. Perhaps that is what makes the song resonate through the ages, particularly in the season of Advent, when joy is bittersweet for those who are mourning or depressed. Those entering the gates of righteousness in order to give thanks to God know in the marrow

of their bones a hard-won gratitude that comes steeped in real loss. The thanks we give to our steadfast loving, saving God is not cheap gratitude. Our declarations of praise well up from the pure relief of having been brought back to life from a near-death experience we will never forget. The humbled and relieved, those who know lament and despair, enter the gates of righteousness with uncontainable joy and shouts of gladness, a backwards understanding that propels them forward in faith.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What experiences have you lived through that you now understand in hindsight? How does this “backwards understanding” help you understand your present reality?
2. Have there been times in your life when you have entered the “gates of righteousness” and given thanks to God?
3. As you prepare for Christ’s coming, for what do you give God thanks?

Prayer for the Day

Lord, your steadfast love endures forever. Your love for us and for all creation is the alpha and the omega, the beginning, end, and middle of the world. As we face challenges and change, uncertainties and unwelcome experiences, open our eyes to see your steadfast love within them all. Open to us the gates of righteousness, that we may enter them and give you thanks. This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it, no matter what it brings. This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it because the Lord is our strength and might. Amen.

Wednesday

Jeremiah 7:1-7

Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD.

Jeremiah 7:2

The Gate of the Lord's House

The Lord instructs Jeremiah what to say and where to say it. Jeremiah's proclamation of God's word resounds from the gate of the Lord's house throughout the city and that word requires a response. Jeremiah's sermon is no mere "FYI" or interesting trivia. The word of the Lord coming from the threshold of the Lord's house stops listeners in their tracks and demands change. "Amend your ways." Change your practices. Alter your actions. Those who wish to enter the gates of the Lord's house must behave in ways commensurate with the character of the owner. Crossing the boundary into God's temple should not be

done casually or without consenting to act in accordance with God's commandments.

Amend your ways, the prophet calls from the gates. Truly amend your ways and your deeds, Jeremiah repeats lest his listeners miss the message. The expectations of those who enter the gates of the Lord and reside within the gates of this godly community include justice for all people, care for the vulnerable and refraining from violence. Would that we did not still need to hear Jeremiah's recitation of the Lord's commands. Would that we did not still enter the doors of our places of worship without carefully considering if our lives reflect the character and commandments of the One we worship.

Jeremiah's sermon still preaches and those of us preparing for the incarnation ought to listen carefully, lest we think we can welcome Jesus Christ without honestly amending our ways and our deeds. As God readies to cross the threshold from heaven to earth, we who anticipate Jesus' coming lean into Jeremiah's urgent word to change. To make amends. To respond to the Word of the Lord with actions that reflect God's love for the world and demand for justice. Advent demands more from us than lighting candles and decorating our sanctuaries. Advent requires that we truly change the way we live. Every time we enter the gates of the Lord's house we ought to ask ourselves if our deeds match our doctrine, our actions reflect God's attitudes to the most vulnerable and our ways echo the divine Word. Jeremiah reminds us to never walk through the Lord's gates without taking seriously what the Lord requires of the worshipers therein.

Amend your ways. Prepare not only for the birth of Jesus, but for the return of Christ. Truly act justly with one another. Do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or

the widow. Do not shed innocent blood. Do not go after other gods. Then, the Lord says, “I will dwell with you in this place.” Are we ready, then, to enter the Lord’s gates, given these requirements for admittance? If not, Jeremiah stands at the gate of the Lord’s house and declares to all those within the bounds of our cities and towns, “Truly amend your ways and your doings.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you consider if your ways and deeds align with the commandments of the Lord before you enter God’s house to worship? This week, when you go to worship, think about this as you enter and leave the church building.
2. How and with whom do you need to make amends? Can you begin to do so this week?
3. In your church and community, what historic and systemic oppression do you need to address, truly and tangibly? How is that amends being made?

Prayer for the Day

Lord, your prophet’s painful word resounds through the ages. We still worship without carefully considering if our lives and deeds reflect your commands and character. We act as if entering the gates of your home requires nothing, let alone all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We recognize the incongruity between our ways and yours. We ask now to truly make amends. Take our desire to conform to your will and transform that desire into real change that brings justice, compassion, and peace for all your children, especially those long exploited, those scared and vulnerable, and those most in need of relief. Amen.

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