

A Surprising God

*Advent Devotions
for an Uncertain Time*

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Preface

In a fine essay, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once contrasted the work of two of his colleagues. The first scholar, he said, sees the Old Testament as a collection of books that emerged out of vigorous fights over ideas and influence. The Old Testament, this scholar maintained, arose from a tug-of-war of competing ideologies and sources of power. By contrast, the second scholar, while certainly aware of the social forces at work in the Old Testament, seeks to discover a cohesive voice resounding in the deep recesses of the texts, one that speaks across the ages and beyond the clash of immediate social struggle. At first, these two vastly different approaches seem to move in opposite directions, said Brueggemann, but actually they complement each other, and both are needed. The first, he said, seeks to hear the Bible *in the fray*, while the second seeks to hear Scripture *above the fray*.¹

That combination of “in the fray” and “above the fray” could well describe the Advent devotions in this volume.

We wrote them in and for this volatile moment in history, when all of us are very much aware of how deeply in the fray we are. The ravages of a tragic pandemic that has taken the lives of millions of people around the world, the pressure cooker of politics threatening to tear our society apart, the fragile economy that manages to exacerbate the already painful division between the haves and the have-nots, the racial tensions among us that have become all the more apparent by recent events, the loneliness and isolation of so many—these are the frayed conditions in which we all live and in which we sought to see Advent signs of God’s surprising appearing. But we were also straining to listen above the fray for the familiar and trusted promises of God, a God who “advents” into our lives in every season of history and whose love endures forever.

The devotions here are alert to a constant theme of the Advent season: waiting patiently in hope for the coming of God. But they are written for a time when patience can be worn thin, when holding onto hope is challenging, and when the peace and joy of the promised Christ child can feel elusive. We feel kinship with the psalmist, who cries out in distress,

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

(Ps. 42:2–3)

In this time of thirsting for God, we cling in faith to the God who surprises by providing refreshing springs in the driest of places and who allows light to break into our world in the bleakest of times.

There are twenty-eight devotions included in this volume, one for each of the days in Advent. Half of them were written by Donyelle, who teaches preaching and Christian spirituality at Yale Divinity School. She has a deep interest in the history and practice of African American preaching, and she has written a book on Julian of Norwich, whose life of devotion was itself a sermon. The other half were written by Tom, who is an emeritus professor of preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Tom has worked extensively in the area of biblical interpretation in sermons and has written commentaries on Matthew, Hebrews, and the Pastoral Epistles.

For the First Week of Advent, Tom wrote the devotions for Days 1, 3, 5, and 7, and Donyelle for Days 2, 4, and 6. For the Second Week of Advent, Donyelle wrote Days 1, 3, 5, and 7, and Tom for Days 2, 4, and 6. For the Third Week of Advent, Tom wrote for Days 1, 3, 5, and 7, and Donyelle for Days 2, 4, and 6. For the Fourth Week of Advent, Donyelle wrote Days 1, 3, 5, and 7, and Tom for Days 2, 4, and 6.

For each day in Advent, we selected one of the Scripture passages for that day in the Revised Common Lectionary and allowed that passage to set the tone for the devotion. As an additional resource in reflecting on the motifs of Advent, each devotion is accompanied by a brief prayer connected to the theme of the devotion. Writing these devotions was, for both of us, an exercise in deepening our own faith. In myriad ways, the events of the

past year have shown us that we can be surprised by pain and sorrow, but we have also come to see how much we can be surprised by God's grace. It is our hope that readers will likewise be strengthened in the Advent season in their quest for God.

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Epiphany 2021

First Week of Advent

The God of Surprises

Luke 21:25–36

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

—Luke 21:28

The Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry is a well-known agrarian and fierce advocate of small towns, family farms, and loving care of the land. He is also, curiously, an opponent of all attempts to predict the future. Regarding the idea of the future, he says, “I won’t grant it much standing,” and, as for predicting the future, “I won’t grant it much respect.”¹

Why? Don’t we depend upon predictions of the future? Who would know whether to take an umbrella to work were it not for experts forecasting the weather? How would we know whether to buy a Honda or a Ford if the consumer magazines didn’t provide predictions of reliability? How could economists do their work without prognoses of the markets? What would cable TV discuss were there no political polls?

For Berry, though, since we cannot really know the future, shrouded as it is in mystery, all predictions are merely projections cantilevered from the past, guesses cast forward from what we already know and have experienced. What is more, the motives underlying predictions are suspect, reflecting a deep hunger to protect ourselves from the unknown, to exert ultimate control over life, to eliminate all unpredictability and surprise.

Those who are familiar with Scripture will recognize that yearning for a future free from surprises is, down deep, actually a desire to be free of God. If our predicting the future is really only a projection of what we already know and who we already are, then we are imagining a future inhabited only by our powers and desires, one that we humans can dominate and control. But the living God seen in the Bible is a God full of surprises, one who since Eden has frustrated all human efforts to eliminate unpredictability. “Do not remember the former things,” God says. “I am about to do a new thing” (Isa. 43:18–19).

This surprising God is at the heart of Advent. Like waves breaking on the beach, God keeps “adventing” into our lives in ways that always amaze. Who could have predicted the creation itself? It was a gift that arose *ex nihilo*, a surprising act of grace that God performed simply for the love of it. What forecaster could have foretold that the Red Sea would have parted for the children of Israel just as the Egyptian war chariots were closing in for the kill? What about those wise men from the East? For all their horoscopes and charts, the new king of the Jews did not turn out to be a ruler in Jerusalem’s royal palace as they had predicted, but a humble child found in little Bethlehem in the arms of his mother. And not even the disciples were prepared for the great Easter surprise: an empty tomb and a risen Savior.

What about the ultimate future? In Luke, Jesus tells us there will be future wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Well, knowing history, we could have predicted that. But then he tells us that at the end of all things there is a surprise. Don't look down, Jesus says. Look up, and you "will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. . . . Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:27–28).

Who could have imagined *that*? Only Jesus, the one who has come, is with us now, and is Lord even of the surprising future.

Prayer for the Day

O God, you come to us in ways we could never have expected or imagined. Do not let us become so complacent, so ready to manage the reality of our lives, that we miss the surprises of grace and redemption that you bring to us. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Peace. Amen.

Day 2

Do You Understand?

2 Peter 3:1–18

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

—2 Peter 3:8

One of the most vexing lessons uncertainty teaches us is that we do not control time. Rarely do we have even the slightest understanding of it. We only swim in the sea of time and feel ourselves either carried by its mysterious current or adrift in its slow, ambiguous drag.

During a visit to an Episcopal church some time ago, I stood next to the priest, John, and shook hands with members of the congregation as they filed out. Since many of the members were from Nigeria, or Ghana, or, like John, from Liberia, these greetings took a while. John asked about extended family members, about children's progress in school, about sports and recipes. All the while one of the younger members—he couldn't have been more than three years old—waved excitedly at

John while he waited for his turn. His eyes were fixed on John's colorfully embroidered robes and biretta. When the youngster's family finally reached us in line, he reached out to embrace John and began to shout, "Hi, God! Hi, God! Hiiiiiiiiii!" John let the boy play with his chasuble and stole, and then looked into his eyes as he explained that he was not God, that he was a priest who helped everybody worship God, that God was invisible and everywhere, everlasting, and would always be with him. "Do you understand?" When the child nodded and smiled, John placed him in his father's arms and waved as the family headed to the door. Just as they entered the doorway, the boy turned back and waved, "Bye, God!"

Because we can only partially comprehend divinity, we are given glimpses in kind-eyed humans who radiate God's grace. Because we are creatures of time who appear as mists and then vanish (Jas. 4:14), we need metaphors to understand God's timing. "Peter" (whether the apostle, his deputy, or successor) provides one when he explains that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day." And, after offering this bite-sized explanation, he turns to us like my friend, John, to ask if we understand. How can we? Yet, Peter compels us to stretch our imaginations and try as best we can to think in eons.

As urgent as they may feel, our doubts and uncertainties are seen clearest through the frame of eternity. Many of the things that consume our schedules and seem to define our lives will pass away. The temporal will yield to the eternal and do so with a clap (2 Pet. 3:10)! This means the jobs and all of the worries about work; the plans; the material objects that surround us from day to day—the sofas and comforters and lamps; but also organizing

concepts like nation-states, land borders, age, race, gender. In other words, most of what structures human life and shapes identity.

Peter points to an invisible reality that we can only barely fathom now. How the veil separating the temporal and eternal will lift we can't know. But the knowledge of God's eternity and our finitude casts a clarifying light on our daily decisions. We can more readily discern what matters. Perhaps we are gentler toward the earth and to each person God puts before us. And surely the daily struggles of our lives have a bit more context. Our small increments of time are long enough for loving action and long enough to reveal the endless grace of the Everlasting One who alone gives our fleeting lives meaning. It helps to lift our pressing worries to heaven. The God who holds eternity can be trusted with the next twenty-four hours, whatever they hold.

Prayer for the Day

In a world that is passing away, your love, O Lord, is our one true anchor. Put our momentary troubles in perspective. Give us today that supernatural peace that flows from the world that is to come. Amen.

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