

A Weary World

Reflections for a Blue Christmas

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Introduction

The soul wants truth, not trivia.

—Parker Palmer¹

This past Christmas was the very first Christmas I had ever dreaded. Tragically losing our son, a thriving college sophomore, to suicide with zero warning signs just shy of his twentieth birthday last year inflicted a brutal blow not only to my heart and soul but to so many people connected to our family. My husband, Jose, and our other four young adult children crawled our way through the holidays with bleeding hearts and broken souls. Even though for many years I have been writing about Christmas being hard, creating spaces to honor people's struggles during the holidays, I had never felt them myself in such a deep and profound way.

It was hard to breathe.

Everything just felt wrong, harsh, raw.

The songs felt ridiculous. The shine was off everything. The only emotion I could feel was a pervading sadness and deep empathy for every person in The Refuge—the faith community I cofounded and copastor in Colorado—who struggles with this season over the

years. Sure, before our son's suicide, I had compassion and tried to be a good friend, holding other people's pain. Real-time empathy and feeling all the feelings for myself was a whole different story.

I joined a club of battered and bruised souls in a way I never expected. My husband, one of the most optimistic and forward-looking people I have ever met, joined us, too. How could we make it through Christmas with this gaping hole in our hearts? What could we do with all these conflicting feelings surrounding the holidays while we could barely breathe, and our other four young adult kids still needed us? What was possible for us to do, and what did we know was completely *impossible*?

As dreaded as those days from Thanksgiving to Christmas felt, I knew I was far from alone. Our numbers are legion. There are so many of us who—for all kinds of reasons—suffer this time of year and keep longing for hope, connection, and peace in the middle of loss, chaos, and confusion; who feel the magnitude of our weary world weighing on our hearts and souls; who are wrestling with chronic pain, broken relationships, shattered dreams, fragile faith, and unexpected losses. My friend Father Scott, a former Catholic priest and Celtic theologian, says that the Advent season is a magnifier for everyone, but in different ways. For some, *it magnifies the good, the happy, the joy. For others, it can magnify the hard, the pain, the darkness.*

This book isn't to magnify the hard, pain, and darkness—or the good, happy, and joy.

It's about honoring our weary hearts in a weary season in a weary world and traveling the road of Advent together as honestly as we can on a quest for encouragement, hope, and strength in the places we are currently living—emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Many of us have multifaceted pain related to the season of Advent. Whether you grew up in church and

observed this season of four weeks before Christmas or you have no idea what “Advent” even means, most of us have one human thing in common—the *holidays stir up both overt and often unspoken troubles*. This time of year taps into very real and present pain, usually centered on dysfunctional family wounds, painful life experiences, and brutal losses—deaths of people we loved as well as losing jobs, health, marriages, church and faith as we once knew it, and countless dreams. Add to it the sting of financial pressures, strained relationships, social distancing, pandemic disease, injustices everywhere we look, and wondering what we even believe about the Christmas story anymore, and Advent can be a very dangerous season for not only aching hearts but numb hearts as well. A lot of us are just . . . weary.

We all cope in different ways. Some put on as happy a face as we can muster, buckle in for the month, show up every Sunday morning for church, and gut it out until Christmas is over; there’s a lot of teeth-grinding and white-knuckling this season. Others build a wall of protection around our hearts and survive through anger, busyness, or keeping our head down and working harder—missing church intentionally or choosing to withdraw from it altogether. Others completely fall apart and enter into a run of heightened anxiety or depression, finding relief in unhealthy ways like overeating, abusing drugs or alcohol, overspending, or overworking. For some of us, after experiencing a disorienting faith shift where much of what we used to believe fell apart, hearing the Christmas story over and over triggers a fresh level of pain, disconnection, and unbelief. When we’ve joined the ranks of the nones, dones, or spiritual but not religious, or maybe consider ourselves agnostic or atheist—we see the hypocrisy of forced belief and the rituals that maybe used to bring us comfort. A lot of us are on the outside of the religious circles we once called home.

No matter what our circumstances are—practical or faith-based—I want to honor that this time of year can be extra hard, extra weird, and extra lonely.

This season can remind us of some painful things:

- *We've suffered losses:* people, jobs, dreams, health, faith, church communities where we were once members. Our losses are magnified this time of year.
- *We aren't where we wish we were in our lives.* We don't have money, partners, children, health, security, friends, community, healing, sobriety, or a host of other things we thought we would, and our disappointment is more illuminated.
- *We are worn down and weary.* The current political and religious climate has felt exhausting for so many, the grind of division between our family and friends, a never-ending news cycle. Real life also takes its toll; often, families are struggling, kids are taxing, jobs are stressful, churches are unfulfilling. We're exhausted and want to skip over December or crawl under the covers and not reemerge until mid-January.
- *We feel alone.* Some of us feel lonely in the relationships we are in, while others feel lonely because we don't have them at all.
- *We are in the middle of crises.* Unexpected personal and professional chaos, finding our way through pandemics, and significant life changes have left us depleted and disoriented.
- *Our families are nonexistent or tricky* (you might have other words for it). While some families are easier than others, often the forced connection dredges up feelings of anxiety and dread. For many, there's no home to go to; we are painfully reminded of being orphaned or the harsh realities of divorce and single parenthood.
- *We feel disconnected and confused in our faith.* We might not have a church or community that feeds us like

before or even feels safe enough to enter. Our old spiritual tricks don't work anymore, and we just aren't sure what we believe these days.

- *We don't do well with inauthenticity in this season of our story.* The forced parties, buying gifts that people don't need, and a host of other cultural expectations for family and friends and work feels fake, and we don't have the energy to pull it off.
- *We are scared of hope.* The Advent season is supposed to be a time of hope and anticipation; yet, for a lot of us, hope feels far too dangerous. Hope makes us vulnerable, and we don't want to let our guard down or get hurt again.

You probably have some other ones to add as well. If you're in any of these places right now, I hope that picking up this book somehow makes you feel less alone. We are in good company this blue Christmas. We're not crazy. We're not faithless. We're not weak.

We're just human.

Being honest about our humanity is always better than hiding.

This journey we are about to take together through Advent could be the right place for you for this season. However, I want to start with a disclaimer: if you are feeling extremely happy, connected, and joyful right now, I am warning you that I'm not sure a lot of these words will resonate. That's okay. There are countless Advent devotionals available that might offer a better fit for you.

My intent for this book is to create a space for people who just aren't feeling like singing "Joy to the World" right now, who are holding on to our faith by a thread, who are grieving and crawling our way through pain and loss in a myriad of ways, who are longing for hope and peace and know that trite words won't get us there. It's for people who want to engage with their own story, the Christmas

story, and the world's story in a way that feels honest, raw, and vulnerable. It's for groups that want to create greater connection and intimacy and avoid the spiritual platitudes and surface conversations that pervade so many church circles, especially this time of year.

Yet, while this journey together will be raw and honest, I also believe it is filled with hope. Hope comes from embracing paradox and contradicting things living in the same space at the same time. It comes from real stories. It comes from engaging with the stories in the Bible with a new lens that shatters the veneer of a false positivity built on "just believing the right things."

This book is divided into four sections with daily reflections for the four weeks of Advent, but you can pace yourself however you need. These major themes are honoring reality, practicing honesty, embracing paradox, and borrowing hope. Each of the themes are *-ing* words for a reason. They are actions of the soul, meant to be practiced. Owning our current story, sharing real feelings, holding paradoxical things in tension, and borrowing hope to keep on keeping on are not simple, but possible. We'll use some passages from the Christian lectionary and other wisdom teachers mixed in with stories and reflections that we'll all connect to in different ways. There will also be a place for personal reflection, prayer and journaling prompts, group discussion questions, and practices to consider trying. At the end of the book are some resources for ministry leaders and for people who aren't necessarily struggling with Christmas but want to be good friends to those who are, as well as ideas for creating Blue Christmas gatherings. Online, you'll find even more resources to help you and your church or group of friends to acknowledge and support one another in the challenges of this season. Visit www.wjkbooks.com/AWearyWorld for social media shareables and other web-ready elements for gatherings that may have moved online due to social distancing requirements.

I hope you will use all this material in any way that works for you. That might be reading this book alone or in a group or as a faith community. It might be using this content to create various Blue Christmas experiences and conversations in your group or church, either online or in real life. It might be reading a reflection each day or catching up at the end of the week. Some of the reflections will likely resonate more than others, but what I hope for overall is that *your heart and soul will feel a little relief*—that in the middle of whatever Advent angst you’re experiencing, you’d feel a bit of the burden lifted and a greater sense of being in good company with other weary travelers as well.

Many churches sing “O Holy Night” on Christmas Eve. The most well-known stanza is this:

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour’s birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
’Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;
Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.²

For those of us who are experiencing a season that’s blue, we’re not quite ready for rejoicing, shining stars, glorious mornings. We hope they’ll come, but right now the words “weary world” are what resonates. We’re weary. We’re angsty. We’re falling on our knees because we’re crawling, not rejoicing.

I’m crawling right along with you, and like all things in life here on earth, we’re always better together.

That’s really what *A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas* is about: crawling our way toward Christmas together.

As we begin, let’s take a deep breath.

Let our tears fall.

Honor exactly where we are today—the good, the bad,
the ugly, the beautiful.

Give our hearts permission to feel what they need to feel.

Open ourselves up to healing.

Listen for God's gentle whispers.

Take good care of ourselves.

Keep crawling toward the light together.

Let our weary souls feel a little less alone.

WEEK ONE

Honoring Reality

Sunday Introduction

Our brokenness is always lived and experienced as highly personal, intimate and unique. I am deeply convinced that each human being suffers in a way no other human being suffers.

—Henri Nouwen¹

The Refuge community I copastor is one of the most honest places I've ever experienced. People tell it like it is. They aren't afraid to share real problems, real pain. For some, it's refreshing; it's nice to hear the human experience expressed freely and fully. For others, it's extremely uncomfortable. Sometimes it's a combination of both. Hearing out loud some of the things swirling around in people's heads and hearts can be rattling. We're not used to so much raw and real.

I think it's what we (and especially the church) all need to get more comfortable with—*raw and real*.

The human experience is filled with struggle and strife. It's filled with anxiety, fear, shame, and doubt. Yet at the same time, it's also filled with hope, love, and faith. Our real stories don't discount the good, and we don't need to put a "but" at the end of each challenging thing we share to somehow minimize the pain. I do it, too. It's hard to just say, "I am suffering" without adding "but I'm still getting up every day" or "but I've got a lot to be thankful for," or all kinds of words that soften it.

Honoring reality is healthy.

There are so many troublesome things in the world right now, so many tricky things in most all our lives. Even if we're not directly experiencing a lot of emotional pain, we almost certainly know someone who is. The coronavirus pandemic, which at the time I'm writing this is wreaking havoc globally, is causing life as we knew it to grind to a halt, and we have no idea what will happen next. People across the street and around the globe are now experiencing a new kind of shared societal pain.

Many of us hold pain from the loss of people, relationships, dreams. We're experiencing trauma and health issues and are deeply distraught about the state of the world related to politics and religion, climate change and the destruction of the planet, racial injustice, and the ravages of inequality. We're often feeling a paralyzing sense of helplessness about how we can be part of the change we want to see in the world—or we are so tired of fighting our own battles that we don't have what we need to advocate for others in a healthy way.

The list of painful realities is different and unique for each of us. As I quoted Henri Nouwen at the beginning of this chapter, "Each human being suffers in a way no other human suffers."² We have to be careful not to compare our suffering to others', thinking ours isn't valid enough, or on the other hand, believing ours is the worst pain ever, such that no one could possibly understand how we feel.

Honoring our own unique realities is just that—*honoring our unique realities*. It's owning that no matter what we're feeling or experiencing related to life and faith, it's our story. It's the place we need healing, hope, connection. For some of us, we're feeling the need for God.

I want to be tender and careful when it comes to talking about God here because we're probably all over the place in how we're experiencing God these days and where we are on our own distinctive faith journeys—yet you need to know where I'm coming from, too. This is an Advent book, and I do still believe in the work of God in the world, in my life, in the lives of others, and in the ways of Jesus, which always lead downward into the problems and pain of real life. At this stage of my life, I've shed much rigid and damaging theology, and my faith has been stripped down to a place where there's so much I really don't know and don't try to know anymore that some people might wonder if anything's even left. What remains seems to be all I need, and I am finding that it's sustaining us through our darkest night.

I have had one simple truth remain—*Emmanuel, God with us*. It's a prevailing belief that somehow, someday, God is indeed with us in the muck and mire of our current realities—with us, alongside us, in, around, through, above, and below us. Jesus, God in the flesh, embodying the way of Love from which we can learn. For some of you, that's comforting, and others of you might feel yourself scoffing.

I get it. Often, that's just reality.

For me, it's enough.

My desire isn't that you believe a certain way or even believe at all. There's room for all of us here. My only hope is that you focus this week on honoring your own unique and personal reality; on tenderly holding your story and seeing yourself in others' stories as well; on acknowledging our shared humanity, letting go of trying to figure things out, and opening yourself up to some tenderness.

Advent is about waiting. It's about expectation. It's about anticipating the birth of Jesus—and in a lot of our churches we were taught that Jesus alone would solve all our problems. Some of you can't buy that anymore. You've seen too much life, experienced too much hardship, crawled through too many dark nights of the soul, and you can't take anything that smells of dishonesty, insincerity, or quick fixes.

I am right there with you. Long before my son died, I had some of the same feelings. The neat and tidy Christmas story that's often presented to us just didn't work for me, and still doesn't.

We've sanitized a messy, weird, and upside-down story, and it's done us all a disservice. Regardless of whether right now God feels near and tender or far and distant from you, that's where we're going to dive in this week—the human reality of our current stories and the human reality of the Christmas story, too.

The Scripture read in many churches this first week of Advent is Mark 13:24–37. You can read it on your own if you want to, but my favorite line is the very last: “Keep awake” (v. 37).

For some, you're agonizingly awake to your story right now. It's keeping you up at night, doing a number on your head and heart. For others, we're trying to tune it out, numb it out, do whatever we can to not feel it.

Wherever you are, I honor you. It makes me think of the words of grief therapist and writer Francis Weller: “To be human is to know loss in its many forms. Rather than hearing this as a depressing truth, our ability to acknowledge this reality enables us to find our way into the grace that lies hidden in sorrow. We are most alive at the threshold between loss and revelation; every loss ultimately opens the way for a new encounter.”⁵

This week we're going to do what we can to open the way for a new encounter, dive in together, awaken to what's

going on in our weary souls, consider the Jesus story more honestly, and honor our present reality together.

What's your current reality? What's going on in your life that's making your soul weary? What's missing that you long for?

Monday

The Real Christmas Story

*We bless the messy wonder of it all,
the experience of being human.*

—Mirabai Starr⁴

A lot of us have a profound conflict in our hearts about Christmas. How we celebrate Christmas, tell the stories of Christmas, and the façades that are put on in church and in the world just do not seem right.

This rumbling in our souls is worth listening to.

Human beings like a cleaner, neater story, theologies that fit into a box, and easy answers to complicated questions. We like staying in our comfort zones, boundaries to keep out the riff-raff and help us maintain life on our terms. For the most part, humans like formulas: *if I do this, believe this, act like this, then _____ will happen.*

But we've all been around long enough to know that is *not* real life.

The real Christmas story isn't clean, neat, or tidy. It's a crazy, wild story: God, choosing to reveal himself in a human baby born to unwed parents in a dirty stall filled with animals and chaos. The least likely people are the ones drawn to him while royalty wants to kill him. The images we often see of the Nativity look perfect and serene, with an adoring Mary gazing at Jesus while the animals watched.

Reality: It was a smelly, noisy, bloody, and painful scene.
Smelly, noisy, bloody, and painful.

Kind of like a lot of our lives are right now, too.

I have no idea where you are specifically, but I know my story right now is smelly, noisy (in my head), bloody, and excruciatingly painful. Each day is a stretch to make it through, and in the midst of all our pain is the pain of so many others in my circle—losses, deaths, addictions,

mental illnesses, despair, pandemic concerns, identity crises, homelessness, loneliness. It's a lot to hold—and we live in suburban comfort. The thought of a neat and tidy God is not only *not comforting*; it makes me want to run the other direction.

But the thought of Jesus as a human being all tangled up in the mess of real life and all of the dynamics of pain, suffering, confusion, shame, exhaustion, and perseverance in the midst of these things—that's a story that draws me in.

What's smelly, noisy, bloody, and painful in your life right now?