

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2021

On Christmas Eve, we welcome the birth of Christ by gathering in the dark, faces bathed in candlelight, singing the Austrian carol, *Silent Night*. For many of us, *Silent Night* is Christmas. Many mothers over the years have joked that the scene in the Bethlehem stable might have been many things, but given the truth of childbirth, one thing it surely wasn't was silent!

Still, that quiet, candlelit moment speaks to us. Perhaps it's the way it calms our spirits. For many of us, it feels like the only quiet moment in a month of relentless deadlines, shopping, baking, wrapping, kids' activities, and social engagements.

This year at NDPC, we will linger with the image of a silent night throughout the season of Advent. Advent is after all the season for waiting and watching. When the commercial holiday season begins after Halloween, our time to dwell in contemplative hope can feel hurried and harried.

We are grateful to the members and friends of North Decatur Presbyterian Church who have reflected on the themes of **stillness**, **slowness**, **darkness**, and **silence**, and considered how these realities appear in their ordinary lives and shape their faith. Additionally, we give a special thank-you to Kent Leslie and Woody Hickcox for their wonderful artwork.

We hope you will read one of these reflections every day during Advent. Each week begins with a welcome, and the days are numbered sequentially rather than by date. (That makes each "day" one that you create.) You may follow @northdecaturopresbyterian on Instagram (which will also appear on Facebook), and you can have it delivered to you daily and share your favorites with friends. Or you may download a PDF copy from our website, which you can also share with a friend as a link or attachment.

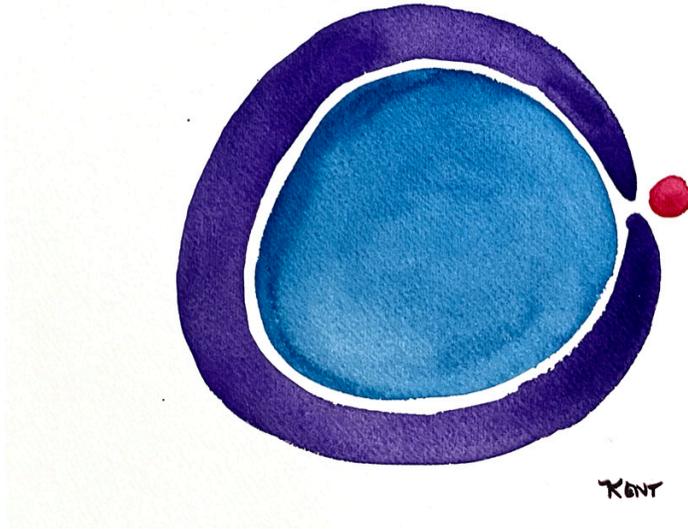
Whether we are preparing for or celebrating it, this season is above all a time to connect to God and to others. All of us who contributed to this collection hope it helps you to do that in some small way each day.

In Hope and Peace,
Beth and David, co-pastors
Rick Neale, editor

Please note: Internet links have been shortened and displayed as text to enable folks who may be reading from a printed copy to utilize them.



Week 1: Stillness (Motion)



Be still and let God love you.

Fay Key, Spiritual Advisor
Founder of Green Bough

In these troubled times being still may seem like a luxury.

Try this: see how it feels to sit quietly

For ten minutes.

Find a comfortable chair.

Plant your feet on the good earth.

Place your hands in a comfortable position –

Over your heart, in your lap, or by your side.

Shut your eyes and relax and breathe deeply in and out for ten minutes.

Try to let your mind rest and if it wanders, just invite it to come back to resting.

Be kind to yourself.

Open your eyes and sit for a minute and feel how you are feeling.

In this Holy season, please use this devotional to re-center yourself.

Give yourself the gift of being still and letting God love you.

Kent Leslie

Day 1: First Sunday

Stillness does not come naturally to me. It takes practice to settle my thoughts, to center my breath, to enter a period of patient, expectant, waiting.

Yet that is exactly what the Psalmist invites us to do as we begin this Advent season. We are given some specific instructions to guide us in an intentional practice – to sit, to wait patiently, and most of all, let go of our fretful worries.

As this season of intentional waiting begins, I invite you to meditate on Psalm 37:7: “Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices.” (Psalm 37:7 NRSV)

The lyrics of “For You, O Lord, My Soul in Stillness Waits,” #89 in the *Glory to God* hymnal, may be another way to help you settle into a time of quiet reflection (<https://bit.ly/3qM7Lhh> or <https://bit.ly/3oi6iw6>)

Perhaps giving up worries about “those who carry out evil devices” is one of the most difficult things to do, because we fool ourselves into thinking that the act of worrying about these bad actors themselves will actually assuage our worries or cause the evil to cease.

Instead, sit still, and wait for a word from the LORD. You may be surprised by what you hear when you listen.

Sarah Erickson

Day 2

On Stillness

Once my son (finally) goes to sleep, it’s a race to prepare for the next day while still making it to bed at a semi-decent hour: fix his lunch, prep the coffee, write out tomorrow’s “must do” list. Tend to the many emails I’ve thus far ignored. Try (unsuccessfully) not to check social media. Pay the Kaiser premium bill *just* in time. Confirm there’s money in my account to cover it. Cajole the cats inside then double-check that the front and back doors are locked. Check the burners on the stove. Are they really off? Better check again.

Jammies, melatonin, Zolofit, saline spray, pee. Wash face, moisturize, floss, brush, insert mouth guard, so I won’t grind my teeth to bits while I sleep.

Finally, I make it to bed, my husband asleep beside me. It takes a long time for my mind to stop spinning, even after reading, even after saying the Serenity Prayer, twice. The world is too much with me.

Later, I wake. All is dark, but I can feel my son lying beside me. When did he come in? The cats are here now, too, the black kitties by my feet, the orange tabby on my husband’s chest. Six mammals in this bed, breathing. This moment is fleeting. In a blink, my son will be grown, the cats will die. We all will. Still. In this moment, we’re all right here, resting in the spirit that first gave us breath, our chests moving up and down, rhythmically.

Be still, God says, and know I am with you.

Susan White

Day 3

Moments of Stillness

As the rising sun awakens the day... I am still.

As frost glistens over the honey-colored leaves...I am still.

As a morning cup of tea warms my throat ...I am still.

I am still in the quiet alone time.

I am still as I look out the window at the passersby, out for a morning walk.

I am still as I savor the sweetness of home-made jam on freshly baked bread.

In these moments of stillness, Christ is present

In these moments of stillness, I am present with Christ

In these moments of stillness, I listen...

This advent season... let us be still.

Be still to hear His word

Be still to feel His Presence

Be still to know He is with us

May your moments of stillness give you peace and bring you great joy.

Prayer:

Father God

*During this Advent season may we be still
out of reverence for the greatest gift ever given,*

Your son, Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Judy Casto

Day 4

Be still and know that I am Love.

Psalm 46:10 (*Psalms for Praying*, by Nan C. Merrill)

It is Christmastime again and much as it was for the Psalmist who wrote “Be still and know that I am God,” the noise and movement of violence surrounds us from enemies within and without. The very earth itself is crying out. We gather round, often in candlelight, and in the silence of knowing we remember that we are connected to all of creation the mountains and plains, the stars, the solar systems, and infinity itself by the love of the Holy One who came to earth as an infant and was recognized as divine by poor, uneducated shepherds and by travelers from afar. This story endures despite all the tinsel and glitter. It is this story, this common mystery that unites us all. Each Christmas season when we gather round and sing the Austrian song “Silent Night,” we are visited by memories of other Christmases and the spirits of those with whom we have shared Christmas in the past.

Each Christmas, in my memory, I return to the small, white, steepled church in the prairie country where I grew up. The faces in the candlelight were faces of those familiar with the soil, with the wonders of seeds, plantings, harvests, and the stillness of rest that comes with winter. Bags of hard candy, oranges and chocolate were given to the children as we walked out into the crusted snow and the bracing cold.

It is Christmastime again. It is the season of remembering. It is the season of love, and renewal of what is so familiar: the Christmas carols, God’s infinite and abiding love in the form of a baby, and the longing of the human heart for the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Unto you a child is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11 KJV)

Be still and know that I am Love.

God Bless you all. Each one.

Carol Tveit

Day 5

Stillness

Stillness implies, at least to me, that everything stops. Being still means more than just being quiet. It calls for a halt in time and requires that absolutely nothing else is going on. Nothing happens in stillness. It is the waiting, the holding back, like a big cat about to pounce on its prey. It is a stopping point devoid of motion.

When the Dalai Lama was asked what he did for work, he replied: “nothing”. How difficult is it to do nothing? What does it require of us, to do nothing? It takes a boundary. It takes self-control. It takes focus and it takes disciplined intention to not act. To have and to hold, for better or worse. An acceptance to not change how, who or where we are. There is a sense of timing required in stillness as it is a reset, an apprehension of what is to come trusting that what is to come is better than what has gone before. Can something be created out of nothing? And yet, this is what God asks –

“Be Still (and Know that I am God)” (Psalm 46:10)

“Our Soul waits for the Lord, (he is our Help and our Shield)” (Psalm 33:20)

“For those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore ***make every effort*** to enter that rest, (so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.)” (Hebrews 4:10-11)

Each of these Bible verses gives us a reason that not only then, in stillness, can we recognize the presence of God, but that it will create within us an inner strength that protects us from losing our way.

As challenging as it is to be still stillness it seems is our salvation.

Do you know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?
(1 Corinthians 3:16)

Lynne Repasky

Day 6

It's hard to be still. It takes courage to sit with our anxiety, our grief, and our loneliness.

Once there was a courageous man (he's still alive in fact) by the name of Vedran Smailovic. He lived in Sarajevo at the height of the Balkan War. One day a line of people waiting in front of a bakery were killed in a mortar attack. Twenty-two people killed for waiting in line to buy bread.

A sadness fell on the city. The next morning, at the hour of the attack, in the quiet grief of the square, Smailovic stepped outside in his tuxedo. He carried his cello in one hand and a chair in the other. He sat down in front of the bakery. Without a word he played his cello.

When he was done Smailovic picked up his chair and his cello and left. He came back each day, at the exact time of the mortar attack, and played his cello for twenty-two days. One day for each person who was killed. One day for each family who grieved. Smailovic opened up a stillness in the middle of violence. His stillness was powerful – the music of grief and love and hope all wound together.

May we all have the courage of Smailovic, the courage to pause and sit in the middle of all the pain the world has to offer. The courage to offer back what we can. And in doing so, may we bring hope to each other.

Kara Morrison

Day 7

Regardless of which Christian season we are celebrating and how sweet it is to be in such a season, I frequently find myself wrestling with God amid my spiritual preparation.

We eagerly prepare for God's arrival; nevertheless, we are still waiting. We are waiting on the everlasting peace and justice – political, social, and economic to only name a few.

During Advent, we are looking at the *then* and *now* of God's return. We are reflecting on the memory and hope while experiencing frustration and expectation of God's arrival.

There is a tension in Advent season. We read the newspapers and watch the television news informing us of violence, hatred, theft, and the like. We become occupied with our privileges, pieties, and rituals that these events only make us shake our heads with a verbal sound of disbelief: "Uh!"

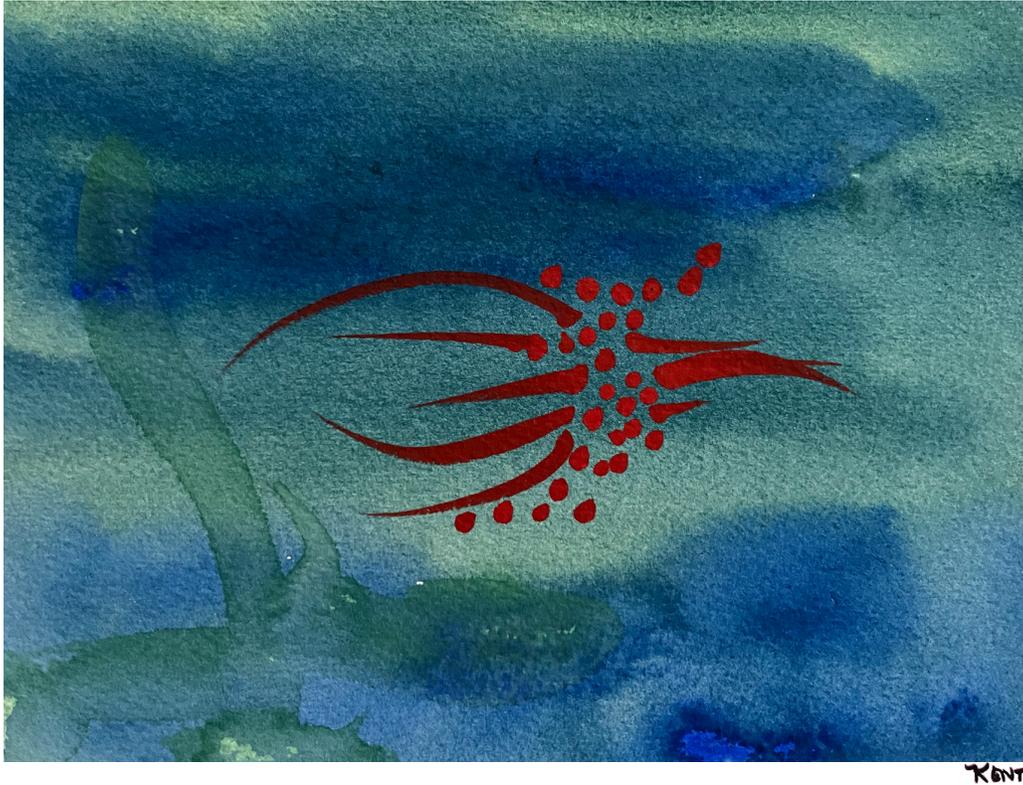
The questions I would like for us to consider are developed from Acts 1:11, "My brothers and sisters, why are we looking around for God? Has not our Creator already revealed Godself?"

Why are we waiting on God when She is actually waiting on us? God is waiting for us to reveal what is at the core of our souls – the *imago dei*, the image of God that has already been manifested into reality.

Being informed of events is not enough! Let us all have faith and do good works because God is *within* us and is *waiting* on us to bring peace and justice we hope and yearn for.

Kendra Grace-Love

Week 2: Slowness (Time)



But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Micah 5:2

Day 8: Second Sunday

Therefore my Beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58 New Revised Standard Version)

What a difference a year makes. At this writing, we're able to gather safely in person, as a beloved community, hoping our eyes and muffled voices do the work of our entire faces, while we mask up.

Alongside friends near and far, we are united in efforts to move, even if *slowly*, toward awareness and care-in-action. NDPC's Temperature + Tapestry = Tempestry display in the Parlor (<https://bit.ly/3CbWvN9>), the Soul Box Project (<https://bit.ly/3kwyCto>), and Knit Wits (<https://bit.ly/3DaJqol>) have kept my hands, heart and imagination engaged during these hurting and healing months.

Silent Nights when I close my eyes:

I pray for our beloved Garden Earth, who feeds and covers us.

– And for our will to do grand and small things to mitigate her and us in crisis.

I pray for God's beloveds young and old, hurt by guns.

– And for advocacy and legislation to make us all safer.

I pray for people hungry and without a home, God's very beloved children.

– And for our determination to offer housing and food.

Don't despair. Works of love are never in vain.

As my mom says, "Mercy and grace cover it all."

Thanks be, gracious God, for our community of love and action.

Sherrill Terry

Day 9

It came to pass...

When you get to be the narrator in the Christmas pageant, you get to say things like, "...and it came to pass in those days, that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered..."

But you don't always know what you mean when you say things like that. Eventually, you get the gist of it... something was compelling the characters forward in the story, *somehow* Mary and Joseph need to get on their ass and get themselves to Bethlehem.

My wife's grandmother is one of the coolest people I've ever met. She is the embodiment of the word *resilience*, she is caring and loving, and at 92, well, she's seen a thing or two! When my wife and I were sharing with her about something we were anxious about, she was so supportive and encouraging – but I didn't know her snark quite well enough yet – I wasn't expecting her advice: "Well, just know this situation won't last forever. The Bible says that 'it came to *pass*', not 'it came to *stay*'..."

So THAT'S what it means! Her witty comment sticks with me. At this time of year, when we read these phrases that are etched in our memory, I wonder if Mary thought, "well, I know this situation won't last forever. After all, all this came to pass – not to stay."

Time compels us forward, not always at the pace we would wish, but always forward.

Onward, to the next part of our story.

Erin Reed Cooper

Day 10

Life

Our life is on a long and winding road, which is sometimes long, and sometimes short. Things don't turn out exactly as planned, at some point. We are confronted with things we don't like, at some time. Sometimes things are good; sometimes things are bad. This is where the love for our fellow humans comes in. Neighbors, church family, family, and friends are needed to help us along the way. To embrace someone as a friend, and to share things with is one of the greatest gifts of life. We all need each other on this sometimes perilous road we are on. We need the help and support of those who love us and those we love to overcome difficulties or take pleasure in the moment.

Doug Clark

Day 11

Already Here and Not Yet

Twenty-four years ago, I was a nervous wreck waiting for our son, John Brogan's birth. My Spiritual Director, Sister Margaret calmed me with these wise words, "In many ways this is like the season of Advent... You are waiting for something that has already come."

Her words helped me through those waiting days and have companioned me since. In this year's Advent time of *not yet*, there is something already dwelling within me, within us. Advent holds us in a season of both/and – during this season the notion of *already here* dwells right beside *not yet*.

Each one of us has a pandemic story to tell. Each one of us has lived through our time of holding on and letting go. As we move through these growing darker December days, we somehow know to light our candles, to hum a familiar carol and to faithfully, hopefully, lovingly keep going. Somehow, we know to keep following the star that leads us through the darkness. Left foot, right foot.

It's tempting to move through these days on autopilot. Many of us know this story so well. It's tempting to lose track of time, lose track of days. It's possible to move through this season robotically moving one day to the next, one task to the next.

What a gift our outdoor world brings as it models a more meaningful way for us to set our pace. Every twenty-four hours, our December days are growing shorter. Each day, the images of light and darkness find their way into our hearts. Even in the world's hurrying and scurrying, our December days invite us to slow down. Even in the midst of the holiday rush, our thoughts and our hearts are invited to take our time, to take *this* time. Perhaps in our slowing down, in our letting go of our calendars, perhaps there may be a *new way* of entering into this story we think we know so well. Perhaps we can hear it again, as if for the first time.

As we journey to Bethlehem, may we listen for what might heal and renew our weary, pandemic-hearts. May this guiding star bring us again, you and me, to what has been holding our hearts all along -- Emmanuel, God with us.

Lesley Brogan

Day 12

The Slow Time of Winter

Some of us may regard winter as a time to just live through, dark, depressing, and cold. We try to survive until we reach the reward of spring. And what a reward spring is! Plants sprout new leaves, beautiful blossoms, new life is everywhere. New life abounds, and we can barely keep up with the speeding pace of changing nature.

I have to confess though, that there was a time in my life that I found spring to be very depressing. I was already too busy, and I didn't have the energy to keep up with the hustle and bustle of spring. All that tree and flower and insect and bird life bursting to go was just too much. Spring struck me with dismay; how could I keep up?

I came to realize then the value of winter: that time we can use to rest, perhaps to hibernate, to restore ourselves for the oncoming burst of resurrection. We can live quietly, as the trees and flowers do, holding within ourselves the seeds of new life to come. Winter is not a time without hope; it holds within itself the resources for new life. But it is a time to enjoy the quiet moment of 'not so much going on.'

I give thanks to God for each season, for each has its own pleasures. The slowness of winter is a gift of rest and quiet, a time of preparation for new beginnings.

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Prayer: Thank you, merciful God, for slow times. Thanks for rest. Thanks for the seeds within us that prepare us for the coming resurrection of life. Thank you for the grace, mercy, and peace that belong to all the seasons, even and especially winter. Amen.

Alice Hickcox

Day 13

Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27:14 NRSV)

Advent teaches us to slow down and make room for Christ. The Psalms tell us to wait and be strong and take heart.

And yet, after more than 18 months of slowing down to protect the most vulnerable among us, it feels as though the world is speeding up with trepidation. As Christians, we prepare our hearts for the Christ child amid the hustle and bustle of the season.

The pandemic forced us to connect with those in our households more deeply than ever before and taught us how interconnected we truly are and how those connections matter. We miss hugs. We miss the faces of friends and the touch of an old friend.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I hope we take the time to remember those connections and how much they matter. Can we simply pause? Can we wait for the One whose love binds us all together?

Wendy Cromwell

Day 14

We have all lost our house keys or car keys, or forgotten why we came into a room. There are many things we do that can't be explained. I once looked for a book for three days. I searched my car three times and searched my house at least twice, and never found the book. I finally found it by mistake. It was on the bookshelf in my office. The one place I hadn't looked.

We are only incorrect if we commit an inconsiderate act. Many times, the things we are searching for is in plain sight. Every now and then our eyes are open, but we fail to see what's in front of us.

Doug Clark



Week 3: Silence (Noise)

Orion stalks the winter sky.
Snow lays on the lake.
Dawn
soundless breath.

Ellen Herbert



Day 15: Third Sunday

The Lord is my light and my salvation! Whom shall I fear! (Isaiah 12:2)

This week begins with the celebration of St. Lucia Day in many cultures. Do you know this young girl of faith? She was born in Syracuse, Sicily in 283CE. Her family was Christian in the early days of the church in Italy. This was a time of government persecutions. In the evenings Lucia would strap torches on her head to light the walk through the underground catacombs bringing baskets of bread to Christians in hiding.

Lucia bumped into the oppressive Roman Government when her fiancé demanded she give up her faith to marry. She refused. The judge sentenced her to burn at the stake in 304CE. She was 20 years old. She was likely one of the earliest and youngest martyrs. By the 6th century her story had spread far and wide.

Some time later, legend tells, famine came to Sweden. Prayers were lifted to St. Lucia – the Saint of light. When folks heard that a ship was coming carrying food supplies, they rushed to the piers and saw a young girl on the ship's bow surrounded by light. The story of St. Lucia became St. Lucy. In celebrations in Sweden and other countries the oldest girl wears a crown of lights on the morning of December 13th.

In the midst of silence and noise we celebrate light in our lives – family, friends, church and community. Let Lucia's courage guide your way and Lucy's kindness light your giving.

Caroline Leach

Day 16

Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10

...a time to be silent and a time to speak. (Ecclesiastes 3:7)

The last few years I have learned to be still; be silent. Be open to the Holy Spirit. After awakening in the morning, I do not look at my computer, or turn on the TV for the first hour or so. It centers me. It seems to me that the world has gotten louder lately. I now crave and treasure my “quiet time.” I like the silence we observe as a congregation, too. I try to banish all extraneous thoughts and “Wait upon the Lord.”

There's an old gospel song “Standing in the need of Prayer” by John P. Kee: “It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” I find that SILENCE is required to be receptive (for me). I'm not a quiet person naturally (just ask my friends & family), but I now treasure being still and silent, waiting upon the Lord.

Another old hymn (yes, it's rather schmaltzy) is “In the Garden” by C. Austin Miles: “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses; And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the son of God discloses.”

Seek silence. Embrace it. And wait upon the Lord.

Holly Williams

Day 17

Sounds of Silence

Have you listened lately to the sounds of silence?

--silence

--quiet

--silence

What sounds do you hear in the silence?

--do you hear the sound of the earth being created

--or the dreams of creativity taking shape

--or prayers yearning to be answered

How will you hear the sounds?

--not with cell phones or computers

--but only in the silence will you hear the sounds

--you may hear the voice of the spirit of God calling to you,

But you will hear it only in the

--silence

--quiet

--silence

--silence

Barbara Jung

Day 18

Certainly, many of you have said to yourself, “There is so much noise, I can’t hear myself think.” Also, when there is so much chaos – household buzzing, distracting sounds, head chatter - we cannot hear anything else. It is precisely because of these disturbances that we need to be silent: How else can we hear God speaking to us?

In a workshop I attended with Cynthia Bourgeault, a guru of centering prayer, she taught us a very simple yet effective way to come into a posture of silence. As we sat in a comfortable position, she asked us to close our eyes and repeat silently (or whisper) a short phrase from Psalm 46. After repeating the words, we were to sit in silence for ten minutes, coming back to the word “be” if we felt our mind wandering. You can do it right now by saying these words slowly and quietly:

“Be still and know that I am God,

“Be still and know that I am...

“Be still and know that I...

“Be still and know that...

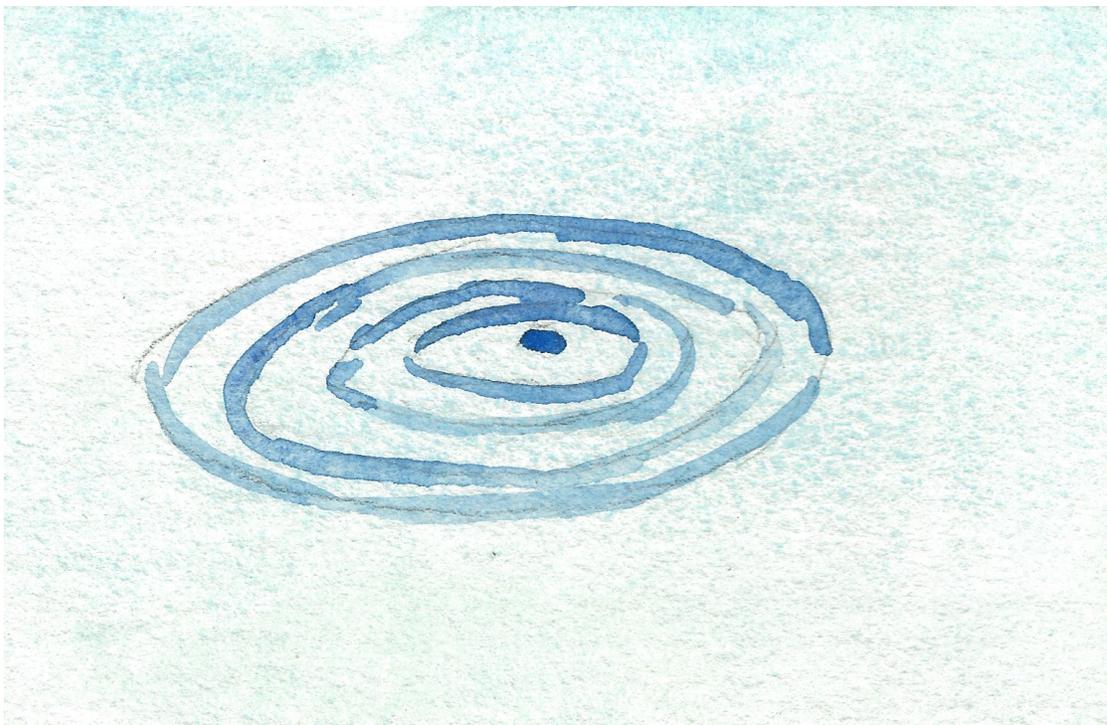
“Be still and know...

“Be still and...

“Be still...

“BE...

Barbara Gifford



WOODY

Day 19

A few years ago on my sabbatical, I visited an anechoic chamber. It was a dark room insulated with the thickest foam triangles that looked like spikes in a chamber intended to trap Indiana Jones. I had wanted to reset from a life that felt too busy and too noisy. We are too often unaware of the toll our built environments have on us. It is estimated that a sound above 100 decibels can have damaging effects on the brain. But we have become accustomed to sounds at high levels. Consider the decibels of everyday noises: City traffic (85 dB inside car), an ambulance siren (100db), a power mower (95dB), a leaf blower (115dB), a live concert in a night club (97db).

The ICU's I frequented with my daughter average 70dB but reach a threshold of 100dB often enough. Even at home, she slept with many of the monitors that comprised that noise. The recommended noise level for uninterrupted sleep is 40dB.

The technician at Orfield Labs in Minneapolis told me the quiet room registered at -10dB. Soundwaves are experienced as pressure in the ears. Relieving that literal pressure from the inside of our heads has surprising effects on people. The tech told me of a naval officer who came to visit while on leave from his post on an aircraft carrier, where he'd spent a year living and working only one level below the flight deck. Even on leave, while asleep at home, he could hear the sound of planes taking off and landing. He spent an hour in the anechoic chamber and reported "They are gone." The foam had absorbed the pressure so that he felt his "mind had reset."

I sat in a chair in the middle of the room for the agreed upon twenty minutes but it felt like barely five. I heard the sound of the ocean in the distance, but this is just an effect of dampening the pressure the way a conch shell secured over an earlobe might shift the tides of how your ears experience soundwaves. When my time was up, the technician explained why I imagined those sounds. The cilia in our earlobes dance in space wanting to hear something familiar to avoid disorientation. My time relaxing in the space felt too short. I wished I hadn't spent so much mental energy trying to decipher those sounds and wondering if they were real or not. I wished I had found the warm stillness of the silent abyss sooner.

Creatio ex nihilo is the idea that the universe was created from nothing. Genesis describes God creating the heavens from silence and darkness. The story doesn't say why God does this, though we might assume the same reason given for creating humankind – connection. The silent abyss is where God's love goes to create.

And God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of God's mouth all their host. (Psalm 33:6)

Beth Waltemath

Day 20

No words were spoken as a young-ish woman with clear skin the color of sunset sand approached my car that Sunday morning. She reached out her closed fist and to my surprise, handed me my own keys.

It was late September and one of the first times I had attended in-person worship in over a year. Often, I'll leave my keys in the floorboard so as not to find them locked in the church. That may seem odd. I know myself.

But this morning looking into strange eyes, instead of alarm or defensiveness, I felt profound gratitude. This “Holy cow what an idiot you are” moment turned into something playful and gracious and filled with mutual vulnerability.

It was an awkward dance.

After many weeks of wondering about the encounter, I now understand it as the blessing of the Holy Spirit among faltering souls.

I cannot think of the Holy Spirit without remembering someone sticking their finger down the middle of a peeled banana and declaring a picture of the Trinity – the “three-in-one”. One of the earliest defenders of the divinity of Jesus as “one being with the Father” was a fourth century Bishop in the Coptic Orthodox church. Saint Athanasius described this triune inter-being, this participating in divine reality, as “reciprocal delight”.

I like that.

If we are all made in the image of Christ and as Richard Rohr describes this experience as “unity-in-diversity”, where each person though independent, becomes the subject, not the object of the other – then we must embrace and believe what Jesus said in Matthew 10:39:

*Whoever finds their life will lose it
and whoever loses their life for my sake, will find it.*

Just for a moment, we two stood inside this ancient love story.

I had recognized myself in the being of another human.

She had no proper underclothes, and I no common sense, and we were the same.

Prayer:

Dance then, whoever you may be.
I am the Lord of the dance, said she.
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be.
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said she.

Dee Raeside

Day 21

I just had the opportunity to create a labyrinth in a beautiful, quiet place. On a hundred-acre property tucked into the Santa Ynez Mountains of Southern California, between two majestic oak trees, in a gardener's-delight of a broad patch of composting leaves, I drew out the lines of the labyrinth with the handle end of a kitchen broom. Once I had the design marked out, I used the broom to sweep the leaves into little hedges defining a path of rich, loamy soil. All this I did in the quiet of my own thoughts. They were not silent, but neither were they screaming to be heard, nor was I straining to try to hear them over noisy distractions. This sort of making in silence – this contemplative crafting – is so often a holy time for me, whether I undertake a creative process that yields a labyrinth, a meal, or simply a reordered, reorganized space.

Perhaps you find your silence in prayer or in meditation – I do that as well! Yet for me there is also a different sort of delicious quiet that settles in when I am making, when I am creating, when I am in the company of (only) my Creator. It's just as the Psalmist has said: "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Psalm 62:1). What does that contemplative crafting look like for you? Even in the bustle of this holiday season, I hope you find that gift, and that it brings you great peace and joy.

Ellen Gadberry

Day 22

I learned this fall that my mother had a baby when she was 19. That had been a secret ever since. I think about the silence when she first realized she was carrying him. The silent pause of her parents when they learned what was coming. The silent fall when she left her full university scholarship to go to a "home for unwed mothers" to wait. The silence of her empty arms when she handed him to the nurses, and to his new family. The silent snow of that cold Ohio winter in early 1970. And then the silence she kept through 50+ years of not knowing him... who, whose, or where. But now? Through DNA testing, online sleuthing, and the desire for familial connection that persists despite time and boundaries, a sound has broken through. Dave and his mom – my mom – have found each other. Now where there was silence, there's now laughter, stories, memories, history shared, zoom calls, new (yet very old) relationships, and abundant, overflowing grace.

Dave has told my (our) mother he is proud of the decision she made as a young woman, grateful for the life he had because of her sacrifice, and delighted to learn about her family now. My mom said in one of her recent emails to her newfound son, "No one could have prepared me for the grace and mercy that I have felt since reading your words and internalizing their meaning. I know on a deep level that God is merciful and loving, but when you see it in the actions of real people who impact your life, well, that is faith in action."

This Christmas season, allow yourself to hear words of grace, even the ones you didn't know you needed, that come unbidden from the silence.

Andrea Morgan

Week 4: Darkness (Sight)



WOODY

Day 22: Fourth Sunday

During the season of Advent, as the sun rises deep in the southern sky, I rush to the study to see if the light has returned. In our study, we have wall art from Mexico that refracts the Advent sunrise into dozens of dancing lights that fill the room with delight- but only for a few moments. As the sun continues to rise, the dancing lights vanish until the next day. This reminds me that the trials and troubles we all face are like the Advent lights in our study; they capture our full attention while they are seen. During the darkest days of the pandemic, when I was certain that “normal” life was over for good (as an enneagram type 6 wing 4) what I couldn’t see in the darkness was that I would learn how to sign “Peace be with you” and pass the peace to church family members sitting several pews away on Sunday. What I couldn’t see was that married life would feel more dependable than ever before. What I couldn’t see were the signs in my neighbor’s yards that read “Things will be OK” – words of wisdom and hope dancing into my darkness. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 18:

We don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

Keith Beaver

Day 23

*If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night',
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
(Psalm 139:11-12)*

When I pray, I close my eyes. I shut out the light and images of the world, preparing myself for a conversation with God. I search for God in that darkness - calling on my other senses of hearing, smelling, feeling, tasting God. These verses in Psalm 139 remind me that God is darkness, as well as light. That comforts me, knowing I need not avoid the darkness, but instead search for how I can more fully see God through more than my eyes. As we celebrate Jesus’ birth, try singing a familiar Christmas hymn with your eyes closed. You may see new wonders of God’s promise in that darkness.

Jill Jacques

Day 24

What do I know of darkness?

I feel comfortable there. 3am has become my friend. Though insomnia is not.

Lately, I have found a solace and a comfort in the dark. In the quiet. Looking over city lights. Seeing roads empty and still.

Peaceful. Soothing. Silent.

When I started this pathway towards Advent, I felt “darkness” inside. Used it as a synonym for my sadness and grief. Drowning in despondency.

So how did it happen, my friendship with the night? Isn't it light that drives out “darkness”? Heroes in white hats? Dawn after the darkest?

God can use anything to heal. He is magic in that way. Limitless. I find comfort with God as my Father. I lost my earthly one recently (father, not god). Now I speak to them together, often interchangeably in my ramblings...intermingling prayers and confessions with pleas for forgiveness and statements of regret.

But the darkness does not scare me. It soothes me now. There is a peace. My God feels closer in the middle of the night. He inhabits my desperation and vulnerability. Heals my shattered soul. “Closer is He than breathing. Nearer than hands and feet.” (Tennyson, “The Higher Pantheism”)

I live for these quiet, dark hours. It is now the place where I heal. Where I anticipate the next miracle. Where I am learning to believe again.

The holidays have never been pure joy to me. My experience of life has been shadowed in greys and complexities. Perhaps another reason for my alliance with dark.

But what better place to light a candle? Come to us in darkness, this season of hope.

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

(Ephesians 3:16-18)

Susan Cornutt

Day 25

According to Appalachian legend and a misreading of Deuteronomy, when Israel returns home thus will begin the last generation. Israel's return to Palestine in 1948 means that, "He's fixin' to come about any day now!" (heard with a Tennessee accent).

The Koran acknowledges the return of Christ, and Muslims wait with hope. Jesus gives strong hints that he returns in each of us every day. Every day we have the honor and duty to bring God's light into the vast darkness of the here and now. Every day we have the privilege to seek justice, feed the hungry and clothe the poor. Every day, we get the opportunity to meet cruelty with gentleness and healing. As Christians and people of God we know it's not always easy to let the Christ within us shine bravely into the seemingly endless darkness. There is so much need, and we get weary. But what choice do we have? Jesus was clear when he said in Luke 9:62: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." We are grateful that we have the whole body of Christ to nourish and sustain us as we push the plow forward and let our Christ light shine.

Keith Beaver

Day 26

I love gazing at the night sky. When I was small, my dad helped me spot some constellations: the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, Cassiopeia the queen, Cepheus the king, and Orion the hunter. Years later, when we brought my younger brother outside with us (he was about 5), he made up a word for what we were doing: "constellating".

Whenever I am out constellating, all those bright points of light in the limitless darkness draw me outward, invite me into a world larger than what I perceive day-to-day. Some people tell me they feel small in such company. I feel connected. I feel like I am part of a living mystery.

There is a poem I first heard in a musical setting in a choir I sang with during Advent a few years ago. The poem is by James Agee. It begins...

Sure on this shining night
Of star made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.

You have to be in a very dark place to see "star made shadows". It's one thing to see your shadow in moonlight. It is quite profound to see shadows in starlight. On a certain shining night this poet became aware of a kindness that in some way had its attention fixed on him. I think that is something like what I feel: Lovingkindness fixed on me.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

Rick Neale

(The musical setting: <https://bit.ly/3F7C4mn>)

Day 27

Hard things happen in the Dark

Hearts break
Thieves take
Harm is done
by hands with a gun
Predators prey
The tempted stray
The grieving weep
as the hurtful sleep

Yet, even in darkness, there is Light

Stars shine bright
on the blackest night
The sleepless pray
Regrets taken away
Guilt is resolved
Problems are solved
Poems are formed
Babies are born

*We all have our own times
of darkness, of light.
Pray that we remember,
in this **Time of Advent**,
that on a singular night,
a baby's first cry
cracked through darkness
to offer us dawn!*

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

(Luke 1:78,79)

God, may we have clear sight to see through the darkness and move toward your light.

Jean Are

Christmas

Darkness falls
A velvet curtain.
Light slips through a seam.
A baby cries.

Ellen Herbert