



THIS LUMINOUS DARKNESS

*Searching for Solace
in Advent & Christmas*

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My husband died on the second day of Advent, several weeks after experiencing massive complications during what we had anticipated would be routine surgery. In that season, my primary Advent practices involved such things as remembering to breathe, eat, and sleep as I began to navigate the awful and bewildering terrain of grief.

Two years later, I still sometimes have to remember to engage in those practices. But this year, as I navigated the second anniversary of Gary's death and entered into Advent once again, I became aware of a keen desire to move through this season in a different way. Just what way, I wasn't sure.

I searched for resources for Advent and mourning. In my searching, I was struck by how so many of those resources take a strategic approach, offering guidelines for how to manage grief during the holidays. It's good to have some strategies for coping with the innumerable triggers that can so easily exacerbate sorrow during this season. At the same time, I knew that my grief was asking me to do something more than manage it.

If I have learned anything about grief in the past two years, it is that grief is a wild creature. Grief will resist every attempt to tame it, to control it, or to keep it tidy and well-behaved. Rather than managing it, grief asks instead that we tend it, listen to it, question it. One of the surest ways to calm it is to give it some space in which to speak—or to holler, or weep.

I have learned also that grief loves stories. Resistant as grief is to pat answers, logic, and linear thinking, it finds a natural home within the landscape of a story, where meaning appears not so much in facts or formulas as in metaphors, symbols, and the unpredictable pathways of narrative.

As I thought about what I need in this season, and how I want not just to abide this Advent but to move through it with intention and openness, I found myself naturally drawn to some of the greatest gifts this season gives us: its stories. In the sacred texts that accompany us in Advent and Christmas, we find an extraordinarily rich landscape that, for all its darkness, is luminous with story. This luminous landscape holds particular treasures for those of us traveling through this season in the company of grief.

I want to offer a sketch of the landscape I am discovering as I revisit these stories. I share this not as a comprehensive, detailed map but rather as a way of beginning to trace the outline of the terrain and some of its treasures, looking for what illumination they might provide for this shadowed Advent path.

How do these resonate for you? What light might these treasures offer for your own journey through this season?

• **The boundaries of heaven and earth are not as fixed as we think.** In the stories of this season, we see a wondrous interplay between the realms. Angels come with strange invitations (Luke 1:5-20, 26-38) and glorious announcements (Luke 2:8-14). Wise men watch the skies and follow a star (Matthew 2:1-12). Ordinary people open themselves to the purposes of God, becoming the means by which God works on this earth. God becomes incarnate in Christ, choosing to enter fully into our human life for the purpose of showing us how heaven is already in our midst. What we tend to experience as separate realms are, in fact, part of one realm in which God is everywhere at work.

In a time when the loss of a beloved can make the separation between heaven and earth seem especially sharp, how might these stories help us perceive and enter into the fluid relationship between earth and heaven?

• **In the most difficult places on our path, spaces of sanctuary are waiting for us.** Pregnant, unmarried, and alone, Mary is in a perilous state after the archangel Gabriel departs. Rather than attempting to tough it out on her own, Mary goes in search of someone who will help. She finds that help in the home of her cousin Elizabeth, who welcomes Mary and offers her safety, blessing, and sanctuary (Luke 1:39-45).

When we feel most alone, who could help? Where might we find a space of sanctuary—or offer it to someone on their own difficult path?

• **When the world as we know it has ended, sing.** Or paint. Or dance, or write, or build something. After Elizabeth welcomes and blesses her, Mary responds with a song that the Christian tradition has come to know as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). With this song, Mary articulates an astonishing vision of a God who redeems and restores the world, not in a far-off future but *already*. That's how powerful her vision is.

Grief tends to gut the imagination. This can make it difficult to discern what vision God has for us, or to dream what our life might look like more than ten minutes at a time. Intentional creativity, whatever its form, has the power to restore and renew our imagination. It helps us perceive the possibilities that are at hand, and, like Mary, to envision and enter into the wholeness that God has somehow already brought about.

When our world shatters, what creative practice(s) will enable us to pay attention to the fragments and perceive how God might want to put them together in a new pattern?

• **To find the next step, sometimes we need to fall asleep.** The journey of grief invites an enormous amount of intention. It asks that we resist the impulse to go numb or to always give in to the exhaustion that so often accompanies mourning. Sometimes, however, the best thing we can do is fall asleep. I mean this both literally and figuratively. In the story of Joseph, who had to deal with his own world coming to an end, we find marvelous images of how God's desires became known to Joseph through his dreaming (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13, 19-20, 22). When God wants to convey something to us, God frequently chooses something other than the straightforward way. Dream, story, metaphor, intuition, synchronicity, poetry, art: God seems to love showing up in our peripheral vision rather than head-on, finding the language or medium by which we will most clearly sense what God is asking of us.

On the path of grief, which often resists our attempts at rational thought and conscious will, what ways of knowing will we open ourselves to? In this season, where will we look and listen in order to discern God's desires for us?

• **Remembering is a practice and an art.** Advent has a way of triggering memories that, when we are in grief, can be particularly painful. There is little to shield us against the sheer quantity of seasonal sights and sounds that remind us of holidays past, when our loved one was with us. Just recently I found myself in the midst of an unmerry meltdown at the end of a day that included a trip to a local bookstore for a few presents. Gary and I had had our first date in that bookstore, and, over the years, had spent many happy hours in its café, our heads bent together over books, cups of tea and coffee in hand. Visiting the bookstore again, now decked out in its holiday finery and with Christmas music streaming through its speakers, provided one of the final triggers that prompted a spectacular Advent overload.

In the face of such memory triggers, intentional remembering can, paradoxically, become one of our most powerful practices. Mary knew about the art of remembering. The Gospel of Luke tells us that after everything—after her pregnancy, after Jesus' birth, after the proclamation of the angels and the visit of the shepherds—*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (Luke 2:19). She understood that the heart is a treasure house of memory. The heart is a space where our memories can be gathered together and made whole in the present.

In this season, how will I choose to practice the art of intentional remembering? Here and now, as I consciously gather and treasure the memories of my beloved, what new gift and blessing might they hold for me?

• **Hope opens us to the future but releases us into the present.** Advent draws our eyes toward the horizon as we watch and wait for the Christ who comes to us. In this season, we sing with Zechariah, *By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us* (Luke 1:78). When we are in grief, looking toward the horizon with hope and anticipation is no small feat. Instead of luring us away from the present, however, Advent invites us more deeply into it, where the kingdom of God is at work even now. This is the nature of the hope that Advent cultivates in us. Rich with memory and infused with expectation, hope calls and enables us to work here and now, in company with the Christ who is already about the work of heaven in our midst. It is perhaps no mere mistake that in other ancient versions of Luke 1, Zechariah speaks not in the future tense but in the present perfect: *the dawn from on high has broken upon us*, he sings.

What am I hoping for? How does this hope inspire me to act in this moment?

• **God has a fondness for what is fragile. This means us.** Advent tells us that God came to us—and comes to us still—with complete vulnerability. Christ is to be found among what is fragile—including us, ourselves, when pain and loss have left us feeling less than whole. In coming to us as a child, Christ chooses to take on our human vulnerability. We see this not only in his birth but also, with awful clarity, at the other end of his life, when on the cross he shows us the lengths he is willing to go to in order to enter into our experience.

In my brokenness, can I see my vulnerability as a place where God wants to know me?

• **Darkness is where incarnation begins.** The gorgeous texts of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany shimmer with the light that God brings into our midst, as in the prologue to John's Gospel: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (John 1:5). Yet if we lean too quickly toward the light, we miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. God's first priority is not to do away with the dark but to be present to us in it. *I will give you the treasures of darkness*, God says in Isaiah 45:3, *and riches hidden in secret places*. For the Christ who was born two millennia ago, for the Christ who seeks to be born in us this day, the darkness is where incarnation begins.

Can we imagine the darkness as a place where God meets us—and not only meets us, but asks to take form in this world through us?

Comfort, O comfort my people, we hear God cry out in an Advent text from Isaiah (40:1). If, in this life, I cannot do away with grief, then I pray that I will at least enter into it with a heart open to this comfort, this solace that is one of the greatest treasures God offers us in the landscape of this season. This comfort is no mere pabulum, no saccharine wish. And though it is deeply personal, it is not merely that; solace does not leave us to our own solitude. True comfort opens our broken heart toward the broken heart of the world and, in that opening, illuminates a doorway, a threshold, a connection. It reveals to us a place where, in the company of heaven and earth, we can begin anew, bearing forth the solace we have found.

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