COUNTDOWN
TO
CHRISTMAS
BY STEVE NORMAN

When I was a kid, mom bought a family Advent calendar at the end of November. It was usually a colorful nativity scene printed on a thin cardboard box with "doors" to open each day leading up to Christmas. Behind each of the twenty-four "doors," was a piece of milk chocolate. I'm the fifth of six kids, so we had to create a schedule for who got to open which doors on which days. On your day, you got to run down to the kitchen, open the door, and eat the chocolate.

Christmas—a chance to have chocolate for breakfast!

Here's the catch: we always knew what was going to be on the other side of the door. There may have been twenty-four different shapes of milk chocolate, but they all tasted the same.

The mystery of Advent is that we don't know the manner in which Christ will be revealed to us, but we enter this season with the promise of His arrival. Advent is about the anticipation for something good, the yearning for joy, the hope for that which brings peace, hope, and delight.

I wrote this devotional to help me cultivate a sense of wonder and yearning in the midst of the chaos leading up to December 25. My hope is that you'll join me in carving space to rest, listen, and reflect as we **count down to Christmas.**

Steve Norman

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 1

My friend Brian says faith is learning to live in “hopeful expectation.” It’s a phrase I keep turning over in my brain. Sure, we all have expectations: for our families, for our personal lives, for our holiday experiences. The tenacious planners among us look for ways to will those expectations into reality. And the hardened cynics will expect things to unravel again, as they always seem to do. Expectations come in both positive and negative wrappers.

But when we wrap our expectations in hope, or clothe our hope in expectation, we put flesh on anticipation. We don’t just expect an event will transpire. We expect it will occur with a measure of beauty, even wonder.

This is the heartbeat of Advent.

Christ is coming.

His pending arrival promises us peace, goodness, light and redemption. And nothing reminds my family that Christmas is coming quite like music. Yes, we’re the family that dials into the all-Christmas, all-the-time radio station the day after Thanksgiving.

It’s been said that music taps the unconscious recesses of the human soul. So maybe the way we choose to listen to our Christmas music can tip the scale from a backwards looking nostalgia, to a forward-looking hope-laced expectation. Here’s my Christmas inspired playlist, my count down to Christmas advent devotional. My prayer is that it will prompt to believe, believe anew and believe again.

Song No. 1: Santa Claus is Coming to Town
I grew up on the Bruce Springsteen version of this one. Something about the opening piano chords and jingling sleigh bells immediately propel me into the Christmas spirit. It’s a simple, magical and contagious song. Hun-dreds of artists have covered this tune since its original writing in 1934.

“Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” It’s an anticipatory declaration. And the implication? It’s going to be a good thing. At least for those who were nice and not naughty. Springsteen’s version includes this basic line, about Santa coming to town, over twenty times. But it never seems to get old.

Santa’s coming.

Santa’s coming.

Santa’s coming.

And Santa’s coming demands something: diligent preparation. After all, he sees me when I’m sleeping. He knows when I’m awake. He knows if I’ve been bad or good, so I better be good... for goodness sake! The announcement of Santa’s approaching is a clarion call to clean up our acts. We may be running out of time.

Of course, if we’re not careful, the inverse is also true. Come December 26, act however you want. Santa has left and we’ve got an eleven-month window for rampant and reckless beha-vior.

But if Jesus is coming to town, what then?

What does our preparation for the Christ-child look like? Do we engage in immediate behavior modification out of fear of punishment? Or greed for reward?

Or is the first prayer of Advent a centering prayer, one that we pray at the stoplight, searching for that parking at the mall, on the way to the office holiday party: Christ is coming. Christ is coming. Christ is coming.

And maybe for Day 1, that’s all we need.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 2

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Charles Wesley

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Yearning. Craving. Soul-thirst. These are the recurring themes of Advent. In this historic hymn, Wesley celebrates the arrival of the long-expected Messiah. He frames this baby's birth as a rescue mission. Christ comes, not merely to inspire, but to liberate a people stuck on the margins. Yes, the people of Israel at the time of Christ's birth hoped for political free-dom, an escape from the rule of Rome. But Jesus didn't meet that specific expectation, so they had doubts about his messianic credentials.

Jesus's aim in coming at Christmas is bigger than one definition of freedom for one group of people. He doesn't come to shuffle the political scenario for one party's preferences. The scope of his redemptive work is infinitely wider; he comes to free us from our fears and sins.

Have you seen any version of Dicken's A Christmas Carol? Early in the story, Ebenezer Scrooge has a haunting vision of his late business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley appears wrapped and bound in iron chains and locks. Over the years Marley had been unconsciously creating his shackles, link by link, through his selfishness and cowardice.

And I have too. Decades of self-serving, self-protecting and self-promo-ting choices will always make us slaves to our worst instincts. Fear and ego become drivers for our choices. Jesus comes at Christmas to release us from these ties. His arrival opens the door for us to find freedom and mercy; he offers to unburden us from the press of guilt. Later in the story, Jesus says "Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest."

So yes, "Come expected Jesus, let us find our rest in thee."

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 3

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

I remember hearing this song at Magdalen College at the University of Oxford. It's melancholy and evocative, a rich juxtaposition of a present pain and a future hope. In a world scarred by division, this prayerful invitation is as relevant as ever.

"O come, Desire of nations, bind all people in one heart and mind."

In ancient Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for "nations" is "ethnos." It can also be translated, "race" or "peoples." In this hymn then, Christ is the desire, not of countries or nation states, but of every tribe and ethnicity. One of the distinguishing characteristics of faith in Christ is that it's not limited to one people group; there's no specific birthright or language required for inclusion in the people of God.

There's a current school of thought that claims the rifts between different races and worldviews are vast and unbridgeable. According to this "clash of civilizations" model, there's no real shot at getting some tribes (whether they're bound by gender, language, race or ideology) to sit at the same table.

But this hymn-writer won't stop hoping. He or she believes there are threads that bind all of humanity together, that a unity of heart and mind among disparate groups is possible through the person of Christ. So it continues "bid envy, strife and quarrels cease; Fill the whole world with heaven's peace."

Where do envy, strife and quarrels run rampant in your world this Christmas? In chaotic family dynamics? In under-handed office politics? Petty neighborhood drama? Gossip-fueled arguments among friends?

Does Emmanuel, the God who walks with us, will for peace to break in and wash over these scenarios? Then the prayer is worth praying. "God, will you bid the end of tensions and overwhelm it with your peace? And, as you do, show me what part I'm to play in ending strife and speaking peace."

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 4

O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold him

Born the King of Angels:
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be glory given!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Christmas isn't only about giving gifts, it's about receiving them. The giver acquires the gift, wraps the gift and presents the gift. The recipient accepts the gift, opens the gift and, hopefully, acknowledges both the gift and the giver.

In the case of this hymn, the gift is Jesus, "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing." Until his arrival in the manger, Christ-the second person of the Trinity-has been mostly hidden, veiled from those he comes to save. At Christmas, we celebrate his appearing in person, his arrival in the flesh. Theologians call this the incarnation, God is fully embodied in flesh, to walk among us.

That said, it's not enough for the gift to be given, the gift must be opened, acknowledged and received. It's not enough to believe the majestic gift is given; this moment demands an active response from the recipient. To use a well-known Christmas morning phrase, "some assembly is required."

Just as breathless children race to the Christmas tree to find a pile of gifts, the shepherds sprint to ancient Bethlehem to greet this baby, to behold this Messiah, to adore this King.

Here's the question I'm asking as we count down to Christmas: Have I moved in the direction of Jesus? Have I approached him to truly behold him? To wait in wonder? To pause with peace? I'm realizing I can circle around the stable and never really enter in. Let's not miss it. Let's take a step, take a breath, bend our knees and behold the King of Angels.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 5

O Little Town Of Bethlehem

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

Bethlehem, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem, is a quiet town. Except when it isn't. It lies on the border of Israel and the West Bank; it sits on the fault line of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's nestled in the southern part of the Judaean Mountains and, on starless nights, the sky is black.

On a recent visit to Bethlehem, my sleep was dreamless, but interrupted. It's not uncommon for street demonstrations to take place on Hebron Road by the imposing guard tower and concrete barrier. Eventually, soldiers disperse the small crowd with tear gas. The pop-pop-pop-BANG and BANG-silence-BANG-BANG, remind me that while I'm not in any danger, the hopes and fears of Bethlehem are very much alive.

It's in these dark, smoke-filled, acrid-smelling streets, that the everlasting Light shines. Jesus arrives in Bethlehem, a simple hillside town, with actual people, not some far away, fairy tale kingdom. But it's the beauty of what happens at these specific coordinates that gives hope to the whole of all creation.

Listen to this line again: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Which hopes and fears? All of them. For the millions who had lived before that night and the billions who come after it. Every hope, every aspiration, every nightmare suffered, every trauma endured - is met in this moment.

Catch it once more: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Christmas doesn't dispel every fear, nor does it fulfill every hope. But, in the person of Jesus, it intersects them. "Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." If it's true, I can pray this: "Lord, enter into my rich hopes and dark fears. Walk with me as I journey into them and through them and with them."

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 6

It Came upon the Midnight Clear

And ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,
when with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold
when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,
and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.

The image here is one of back-breaking toil. Road-weary travelers inch uphill under the weight of life's harsh burdens. What crushing load are you carrying this season?

What's inflicting pain these days? What's slowing your steps?

Is it grief? Has the loss of someone dear stolen your ability to breathe, to move?

Is it worry? Are you racking your brain to figure out how the impossible circumstances can resolve?

Is it fear? Does the threat of the unknown press air out of your chest?

Or maybe it's anger? Resentment towards others for distant hurts or recent wounds is forcing you to bend low as you walk.

This song writer has two words of encouragement: rest and know.

Rest.

God hasn't loaded us with many of the burdens we're carrying. Some, not all, are weights we choose. We can put those imposing packs down by the edge of the road and listen.

And when we listen, we just might hear the angels sing. I'm not sure what melodies angels generate, but the Scriptures say their lyrical content is predictable. They always sing about the attributes of God. When we pause for mindful rest, we shift our focus from our stressors to our Savior.

And then we can know. Know that at a future date, when the "ever-circling" years have run their course, Christ will come again, declaring peace to the chaos and healing for every hurt. On that day, it won't just be the angels singing, it will be the whole world declaring the goodness and wonder of God.

If you're exhausted this season, sit, breathe, hear and believe.

Christ has come. Christ is here. Christ is coming.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 7

George Michael? Meet Christina Georgina Rossetti

Wham!'s 1984 hit, "Last Christmas" is one of those songs that you can find yourself humming in December- even if you're not trying to. If you're not familiar with it, here's the only line you need to capture its, well, heart.

"Last Christmas, I gave you my heart. But the very next day you gave it away."

As far as songs about holiday betrayal go, it's surprisingly upbeat. But if you've weathered a devastating loss between last Advent and this one, the holiday season is anything but.

What was true about last Christmas that won't be true about this one? For many of us, someone we love will be absent from the table. Or maybe, because of a rift in a relationship, we won't be exchanging gifts with someone we once did. Or there was an unplanned move and your new place doesn't have any shrubs on which to hang those Christmas lights. Somewhere between December 25 of last year and this moment, something dear to you was taken, broken or lost.

Now what? With all due respect to Wham!, I'm not sure tossing a fragile heart into the lap of this year's someone special is the answer. More than a century before "Last Christmas" hit the charts, another English writer penned these lines about giving one's heart away. Here's what Christina Georgina Rossetti wrote:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what can I give Him?
Give Him my heart.

It's beautiful in its simplicity. Christina's asking: Come Christmas, who can I trust with my heart, scarred and delicate as it is? The Christ-child. It's the only significant gift I can offer and He's the only One who can be trusted to heal, keep and defend it.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 8

Silent Night! Holy Night!

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light;
Radiant beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

"Silent Night" always brings me back to one of two places in Western Springs, Illinois. The first is the living room floor in my childhood home. This is where my siblings and I would open gifts on Christmas morning. Over the course of the celebration, someone would put the John Denver and the Muppets album "A Christmas Together" on the turntable. After the first verse of "Silent Night," John Denver tells the song's backstory. In 1818, Joseph Mohr wrote the lyrics and gave them to Franz Gruber, who wrote the transcendent melody. The church organ was broken, so the first performance was simply two vocalists and an acoustic guitar. It's always been beautiful in its simplicity.

The second place was the sanctuary of The Village Church. The script for Christmas Eve was consistent. We'd open with Christmas carols; Cindy Winkler would sing "O Holy Night" and Rev. Dr. Art Brown would give a brief Christmas homily. Then we'd dim the lights and sing "Silent Night" by candlelight. We usually sat in the balcony, which provides the best view of the light passing from person to person. As the light traveled from the front of the room to the back, row by row and pew by pew, the warm glow grew brighter and brighter.

Reflecting on it now reminds me of this verse:

John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Yes, the silent night carries love's pure light into a dark and dreary world. And that love, that burning, illuminating love, chases fear back into the shadows.

This radiant love is all-consuming. It's not the cheap fluorescence of transactional affection. It's the fire of self-sacrificing, others-elevating, unconditional passion. The light that bursts forth in Christ's countenance is the dawn of redeeming grace.

On a visit to the Middle East, I visited the ruins of a Byzantine era church. Our guide explained to us that these churches were usually constructed with the altar facing east. The objective was for the congregants to greet the dawn as they worshiped. Advent is a chance for us to declare our belief that Jesus, Lord at his birth, brings the dawn of hope, at both his birth and his resurrection. And no matter how dark the night appears, the light of Love breaks through still.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 9

Go, Tell It on the Mountain!

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born,
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.

We have a few nativity sets in our home. There's the Fisher-Price Little People edition. It's plastic and indestructible, a memento from our kids' toddler years. Then there are a few hand-carved olive-wood pieces from my trips to Bethlehem, a bona fide link to Christ's birthplace. But only one ends up on the mantle: the wooden Willow Tree figurines.

Kelly and I discuss and debate exactly how each figure should be placed. We're looking at spacing (they can't be too bunched up), story lines (the Magi clearly belong in their own grouping) and angels (the second Wise Man must be turned just so. Otherwise you'll see the tiny super glue seam on the back of his neck where he was decapitated after I dropped him one year).

If you want it to look nice, the staging matters. But the divine choreography of the first Christmas is different. It's in the "lowly manger" that the humble Christ is born. The lowly manger isn't ornate and it doesn't have clean lines. It's rough-hewn and messy. The hay is damp with donkey drool and the edges are clearly splinter hazards.

The stable is not a snow capped, rustic barn from a country music Christmas album cover. There are no strings of Edison bulbs like there were at the farm for your cousin's wedding. Some historians claim the manger was in the back of cave adjacent to the Bethlehem Inn.

God cares less about how this picture looks on a postcard and more about what it means to the shepherds who came. Christmas isn't about beauty, though it is beautiful. It's about proximity.

Why does the manger matter? Because it says Christ meets us where we are. Christ embraces humility because we need a Savior who knows where we live, who refuses to put on airs, who comes with everything to give and nothing to prove.

This is a message worth broadcasting, a missive to shout with a megaphone: "Christ is born close to us! His lowly birth sets the stage for his humble life and simple message. He walks through the dark and the dirt and the mess with us to redeem every cracked part of our lives. We're not alone. We're not forgotten. We're not abandoned. Tell it everywhere you can!"

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 10

Away in a Manger

The cattle are lowing the poor Baby wakes
But little Lord Jesus no crying He makes
I love Thee, Lord Jesus look down from the sky
And stay by my side 'til morning is nigh

Here's a standard Christmas lullaby. It's gentle and safe... and wrong. To be fair, there's only one line I take issue with: "little Lord Jesus no crying He makes." If Christmas is the celebration of a Jesus that is both fully divine and fully human, then it requires a crying baby.

Have you ever seen Christmas art with a baby wailing in a manger?

I haven't.

Or a depiction of an adult Jesus laughing in stained glass?
I can't say I've discovered that yet either.

Yet, weeping and joy are expressions of the full range of human emotion. If Jesus is fully human, we should expect both.

Of course, a non-crying baby paints an idyllic and serene picture. But it's not realistic. When Kelly was pregnant with our firstborn, I joined her for a visit to her OB's office. As we waited to see the doctor, I flipped through a parenting magazine and found an article written by a young father to expecting dads. He said, "Anyone who tells you having a newborn is easy doesn't correctly recall the first six weeks." A newborn is a gift of joy, accompanied by sleepless nights, parental anxiety and lots of crying. It's the only way babies can express feelings of hunger and discomfort.

The little Lord Jesus cries. The adult Jesus cries too. He weeps when a family friend dies. He expresses disappointment when the people he came to rescue reject him. He cries out in anguish when he suffered for our redemption. The prophet Isaiah describes him as "a man of suffering, familiar with pain." The only person who can empathize with those who suffer, is one who has tasted suffering.

This is good news at Christmas: the Christ who knows what it is to hurt identifies with us in our hurts. The hungry baby understands our soul aches. The rejected Messiah meets us in our loneliness. Sure, a crying Christ-child shatters the myth of a transcendent baby, but it gives us a relatable Redeemer, a sympathetic Savior.

Cry on, little Jesus. Cry on. Your tears tell us we're not alone.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 11

The First Noel

And by the light of that same star
three Wise Men came from country far;
to seek for a king was their intent,
and to follow the star wherever it went.

Last year our family moved from suburban Detroit to Holland, MI. We still miss our friends and neighbors, but there's something incredible about life here: the sky.

There's more open space here; the stars don't have to compete with lots of city lights. On some nights, when I take the dog out before everyone goes to sleep, I'll take a minute to stare at the stars. I'm not great with the constellations, I can only pick out Orion and the respective Dippers.

The Wise Men, however, weren't recreational stargazers. They weren't looking for shapes, they were looking for a sign. For them, the night sky was loaded with clues to help them unlock the mysteries of life. If you read the stars right, you could get insight for personal problems and national crises. The Wise Men were tracking a rare astronomical event, possibly a conjunction of planets, with critical implications. So, they picked and packed specific gifts and began a 700-mile journey. It would have taken weeks, if not months.

And if you tracked their journey by map, it wouldn't have been a straight line from Babylon to Bethlehem. They didn't know exactly where they were going. The bright light was moving over the weeks, so every night they'd course correct to make sure they were still on track. Every choice they made needed to serve their primary objective: to find the King.

They "followed the star wherever it went." This is still the essence of a vibrant spiritual journey. Faith is dynamic, not static. I don't make "a" decision to follow Christ, I need to make thousands of decisions to ensure my spiritual trajectory still points towards Jesus.

Jesus says, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me." The Wise Men made small tweaks and big sacrifices to get to Jesus and Jesus invites us to do the same.

Where do you sense God leading you these days?
In your relationships? In your work?
In your battle for sobriety?
In your character? With you anger or fears or dreams?

Are you ready to follow the star wherever it leads?
The route won't be direct, but it will always take you to the King.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 12

I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day

The only versions I've heard of this song pulls selected stanzas from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Christmas Bells." Longfellow is asking questions I often ask around this season: Where is this promised peace on earth? Can someone please reveal this lauded "good-will"? It feels like our world is perpetually neck-deep in mad-ness and conflict.

Longfellow felt this deeply, especially as one of his sons was injured fighting for the Union in the Civil War. His poem describes his struggle to reconcile the hope of Christmas with the horror of war.

Here is "Christmas Bells" in its entirety:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”

These lines, over one hundred and fifty years old, are as relevant as ever. The din of ethnic violence, slavery, human trafficking, fear, rage and racism roar above the carol of peace. Conflicts shake the earth with seismic force, tearing homes and nations apart.

And we share the poet’s despair. “There is no peace here. Hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men.”

Yet, the bells boom the song back to the broken-hearted:
“God is not asleep. Though it’s not today, a day is coming when The Wrong shall fail.

All of it.

Systemic wrongs will unravel.
Individual wrongs will be exposed.
Darkness will be consumed in light.
Peace will vanquish violence.
Life will swallow death.
And love will drown indifference and hostility.

Advent doesn’t merely point us to the Christ who came. It directs us to the Christ who is still coming, coming with tender healing and righteous justice in his holy, nail-scarred hands. In the meantime, I don’t have to understand what God is doing to be fully confident in what God will do on the day that Right prevails.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 13

Do They Know It's Christmas?

Let's be clear: Bob Geldof and Midge Ure's 1984 hit "Do They Know It's Christmas?" did much good. The writers hoped the song could raise £70,000 for famine relief in Ethiopia. Within twelve months of its release, it generated £8 million and exposed millions of new wave fans to the severity of the crisis. That's the good news.

Even so, I confess I cringe every time I hear this song. This tune seeks to help us see the world differently, but there are obvious cracks in the lenses. In Geldof and Ure's defense, if they were writing it today, they'd write it differently. Social media and globalization have shortened the distance between people groups, cultures and continents. Those of us in the West know more about geography, cross-cultural communication and diversity than we did then.

Nevertheless, here are my two least favorite lines:

- "... thank God it's them instead of you." This may be the only line I've heard Bono sing that I can't stomach. Love, not pity or guilt, should drive us to care for those on the margins. And just because their suffering is evident, doesn't mean material wealth can mask deep spiritual poverty.
- "Where nothing ever grows..." Developing nations are not lifeless barren moons-capes. Yes, drought is real and devastating. But the notion that where "they" live is devoid of beauty in any form is harmful.

The world is filled with tragedy and crises that call for a response. When we go, let's leave our personal preferences and cultural agendas aside. When we serve those in need, we should do so in the same way Christ comes to us at Christmas: like a holy infant, tender and mild.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 14

Joy To The World!

Joy to the world
The Lord has come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and heaven and nature sing

Luke 2:7 She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Here's what I can't figure out about Mary and Joseph's trip to Bethlehem. Why do they need to book a guest room? They're traveling to Joseph's town. Bethlehem isn't Tokyo, New York or Sao Paulo. At most, there are a few thousand people who live there. Surely, one of Joseph's cousins has a futon Mary could crash on.

Is there really no physical space for Mary and Joseph in his extended family's homes? Or is there just no emotional, psychological, spiritual place for them? Are they being blackballed because of Mary's pregnancy? Or some unresolved family conflict? Either way, nobody who knows Joseph (and certainly somebody does) has prepared room for him.

What's the vacancy rate in your heart these days?

Is there any margin for unannounced guests?

Have you ever stopped to consider that you've got a limited amount of square footage in your heart? Hearts are funny that way. As a parent, you can go from one child to two and find the capacity to love both immensely. From this vantage point, you've got unlimited bandwidth for love.

But if you've ever been hurt, you know a Wound can set up a cot in the corner of your heart. Over time, he invites his old friend Resentment over. Resentment may reach out to Indifference and his brother Rage, along with his sometimes girlfriend Self-Protection. Eventually, Self-Righteousness and Vindictiveness drop in. Your heart is crowded.

It doesn't happen on purpose. None of these people were invited, but they're here now and you're running low on room. If you plan to welcome the King at Christmas, you're going to need to free up some space. You don't get to build an addition, you have to clear out the only heart you have.

Peace cannot take a seat in your soul if there's clutter on the couch.

If you really want to prepare Him room, what needs to go?

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 15

Good Christian Men, Rejoice

Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave:
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
to gain his everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save!
Christ was born to save!

I appreciate the forthright nature of this one. If, in fact, Christ was born to save, then we need not fear the grave. I've had the honor of presiding at more than a few graveside ceremonies after funeral services. Lately, more families seem to forego this ritual. Some aren't burying their loved ones; they opt for cremation. Others choose a brief chapel service at the cemetery. After years of witnessing these, I know why.

When a casket is lowered into the grave, it speaks to the finality of death. This is the end. There's no reversing, undoing or backtracking from this moment.
It's over. He's gone.
She's lost to us, forever.
There's nothing more ominous, more heartbreaking then peering down into an occupied grave.

I know. This theme feels more suited for a Lent offering, than an Advent one. But acknowledging the grave reminds us of the whole aim of Christ's arrival at Christmas: to save. On the grand scale, Christ arrives to give His life, so a lost humanity can find its way back home to a gracious God. So yes, Christ comes to save us from spiritual death through his sacrifice on the cross.

And because of his resurrection, we need not fear physical death. Maybe this is why so many funeral officiants include this line from 1 Corinthians in their talks: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" Christ comes to rescue us, both from the pain of spiritual death and the fear of physical death.

And he comes to save us from all the lesser graves along the way: the grave of despair, the tomb of addiction and the crypt of unresolved anger. These are just a few of the markers of emotional and psychological loss. Jesus comes to spare us from death in all of its forms. It doesn't mean there won't be heartache and loss along life's winding road. It does mean those losses don't have to permanently shatter us.

If Christ is born to save, what do you need to be rescued from this Christmas?

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 16

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
ris'n with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth.

There's an overlooked line in this classic: "Risen with healing in His wings." It's taken directly from the last book in the Old Testament. The first verse of Malachi 4: "The Lord of Heaven's Armies says, 'The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed—roots, branches, and all."

The writer pairs arrogance and wickedness, which is interesting. I know arrogant people I wouldn't call evil, but selfishness drives wrongdoing in all of its forms. People who, over the course of a lifetime, set their agendas against God's will face serious judgment.

Fortunately, the writer doesn't stop there. Malachi adds, "But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture." Those who submit their hearts and wills to God will experience the fullness of His mercy.

The all-consuming, wrath-dispersing Lord of Heaven's Armies and the healing, liberating, joy-inspiring Sun of Righteousness are the same Jesus. He's not a Jekyll/Hyde deity, flip-flopping between light and dark dimensions. He's the singular Prince of Pea-ce; his presence is experienced differently by different people in different moments. Our posture in relationship to Jesus determines our perspective of Christ.

The Christ of Christmas lays His glory by, so we can be spared divine punishment on judgment day. Rather than delivering destructive fire, the Sun of Righteousness cauterizes our soul wounds with the healing in said wings. We call on angels to sing at Christmas because God is bringing light, life and freedom to us. When we taste this joy, we exit the encounter bounding with joy.

What's got you all tangled up this season? Where are you feeling trapped?
What kind of healing do you require? Physical? Emotional? Psychological? Spiritual?
If you need healing this season, ask the Christ who came to offer it to us.
The Prince is here with the restoring peace you require; the Sun has come to shine restoring righteousness on us.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 17

What Child is This?

Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king to own Him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

"Mean estate." It's not a phrase I've heard outside the context of this song. In this instance, it can signify something "shabby or poor in appearance" or "of low birth or social class."

When Kelly and I were expecting our first child, a friend bought us a crib as a gift. Not just any crib, but a Pottery Barn Sleigh Crib in Ivory White. At the time, we were living in a 796-square foot two-bedroom ranch. It was easily the nicest piece of furniture we owned. We had limited resources in that life-stage, but we were still doing better than Mary and Joseph.

The Holy Family wasn't comfortably middle-class. They were poor. When Mary came to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate the baby Jesus, she brought two birds with her as a ceremonial offering. Why birds? Leviticus 12:8 says "If a woman cannot afford to bring a lamb, she must bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons."

The Christ child lies in mean estate to remind everyone, regardless of class, that He belongs to all of us. I once read Pixar Animation Studios, often tells stories of children in single-parent homes (see "Finding Nemo," "Up," "Toy Story," "The Good Dinosaur," "Ratatouille"). The theory is these stories relate to a broader audience.

When the story of Jesus is written, it begins with a humble family in a small town. My friend Naz told me about his childhood home in Mexico. It was a oneroom dwelling with a dirt floor. He said when his mother was ready to give birth to one of his brother or sisters, everyone would go outside until the baby arrived.

While our childhood experiences are different, mine is the exception; his is the rule. Billions of people throughout history can describe humble origin stories. To the majority, Jesus's sleeping among the animals is normal; it makes him unassuming, accessible.

"Come, peasant, king to own Him."

Jesus is the King who lifts peasants to their feet and brings kings to their knees. At both the manger and the cross, Jesus is the great equalizer. When he brings salvation, he disregards our bloodlines, our bank accounts and our backstories. He only seeks loving hearts longing to enthrone him.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 18

Holy Night!

Led by the light! of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here came the Wise Men from Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need - to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend!

"O Holy Night!" is my favorite Christmas anthem. I think I could recite the first verse lyrics, or at least sing them, without any help. The rest of the song? Not so much. But in the second verse, these are the lines that speak to me:
"In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need – to weakness is no stranger."
Consider the writer's claim: Christ is born to be our Friend.

As a child, I remember hearing the hymn "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." The image of as friend isn't new. I've always considered "friend" to be one of the many, many roles Jesus plays. It's right there on the list with Savior, Helper, Comforter, Redeemer and on and on it goes.

This song claims Christ is born to be our friend. Christ doesn't arrive as a transcendent cosmic hero at Christmas. Maybe God could have orchestrated other means to rescue humanity; one that didn't require the incarnation. But God walks among us for the purpose of inviting us to connect. God interacted personally with Adam, Eve, Enoch and Moses. Christ's objective is to do the same with us. He enters our world with the aim of friendship.

Not only that, but this King/friend also knows our needs. Have you ever had a friend who was kind, gracious and maybe a little oblivious? He or she was loyal to the end, but had a hard time anticipating your needs? Jesus isn't a cold clinician; he doesn't just diagnose our hurts. He identifies with them. Weakness is no stranger to him. Loneliness? Rejection? Anger? Temptation? Disappointment? Grief? Jesus knows them all.

He's a friend who knows everything about us.

And he's the only companion who can empathize with every challenge we face.
It's another aspect of the great news of Christmas: we are not alone. We can trust God implicitly; Jesus already walked the road we're traveling. He knows what's around the bend and promises to walk it with us.

And it's this truth that prompts hoping hearts to glow.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 19

The Chipmunk Song

"We can hardly stand the wait
Please Christmas, don't be late."

The Chipmunks are Christmas's most famous rodents. In their holiday hit song, Alvin, Simon and Theodore beg for Christmas to hurry up. After all, they have been good and they know exactly what they want: a trick-performing plane and a hula hoop. The anticipation is killing them; Christmas needs to come faster.

As a kid, I felt the same way. I remember when the massive Sears and JC Penney catalogs would arrive at the end of November. My siblings and I would put them on a table in our basement with a pen and a yellow legal part and start our research. I'd look at Hot Wheels cars and Star Wars figures, my sisters would peruse the pages and pages of baby dolls and Barbies. I'd start with a draft list and, over the course of the next few days, tweak and hone it. Eventually, I sharpened it to a few items I had the best chance at getting. I filed my request with mom and dad and waited.

It was only a couple weeks until Christmas, but the wait was torturous. I knew the exact day my gifts would arrive and the wait still seemed unbearable. That said, consider those living in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago. Their families had been waiting for generations, centuries even, for the arrival of the promised Messiah. Seasons came and went, kingdoms rose and fell, thousands were born, then buried. For them, this "Christmas" was a long time coming. But for God, it wasn't late. From God's perspective, Christmas was right on time.

No, the answers to our deepest longings are not guaranteed to arrive with a fancy bow on the morning of December 25th. But the answers to our prayers are coming, and though the wait is difficult, God promises to be right on time.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 20

Battle Hymn of The Republic

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!
While God is marching on.

"Battle Hymn of the Republic" isn't officially a Christmas song. But there's a direct reference to the first Christmas in the fifth verse. The writer, Julia Ward Howe, was an activist. She campaigned for those on the mar-gins; she dreamed of a day when slaves would be free and women in the U.S. would vote. While she lived to see the end of the Civil War, she died ten years before the 19th Amendment was ratified.

Howe believed Christ's arrival on earth is a politically charged moment. Jesus didn't come to bless us, he came to change us. He lived, and died, so people could be spiritually transformed, liberated from the invisible bonds that enslave hearts and minds. Jesus's mission on this earth was driven by love-driven sacrifice. His commitment to his cause eclipsed his cares for comfort.

God, claims Howe, is marching, moving purposefully across the stage of human history to announce the Kingdom. This Kingdom looks to address injustice and broken social systems at every turn.

For some, this view of Christmas is unnerving. We don't want to politicize the crèche. But Howe is onto something here. And she's not the first woman to write a social anthem that references the Messiah's birth.

Listen to these words:

For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.
And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation.
He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.

These are the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as recorded in Luke 1.

Some of these lines feel better suited for a protest rally than a praise song, but they are a powerful nod to Mary's understanding of her place in the world. The difference between Julia Ward Howe and Mary of Nazareth is power distance. Howe wrote as an educated woman of means and influence; she's at the top looking down. Mary sings about the lowly as one of them; she's at the bottom looking up.

Both sing of a God on a mission, but Mary's urgency is higher. She's ready to be filled with good things now, because she's hungry now. Christmas means everybody matters. And that means there's a reckoning for those who are stepping on the marginalized to get what they want.

Christmas reminds us that God is still marching, breathing hope and light into the forlorn corners of the world.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 21

Good King Wenceslas

In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, while God's gifts possessing,
You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing.

Here's a jolly and catchy Christmas tune that requires some backstory. Wenceslas was not a king; he was just awarded the title posthumously. And the melody is taken from a song celebrating spring, so some believe it should be an Easter song, not a Christmas one.

That said, Saint Wenceslas I, Duke of Bohemia, lived in Czech in the 10th century. He was celebrated for his generosity and rumored to go out into the snow, barefoot, to feed the local poor. In this last verse, the saint's servant is ready to quit, he can't find the strength to keep slogging through the snow. But Wenceslas paves the way and his page follows, literally, in his footsteps.

Then the writer drives the moral home: Because God has given us gifts, we are compelled to share with the poor. When we do, we get blessed along the way.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says if we want to find him, we should look among the poor, the marginalized, the under-resourced: the "least of these." Mother Theresa is believed to have said, if you ever find yourself in a spiritual rut, a season where you can't seem to find God, go spend time with the poor. You are guaranteed to meet Jesus there.

Christmas tends to find most people more prone to financial generosity than other seasons. After all, we tend to spend a legitimate chunk of change giving people we already know stuff they don't officially need. So, if I walk out of the mall, having spent hundreds of dollars on my friends and family, I feel like I should at least throw some change in the red Salvation Army kettle.

But Wenceslas's song calls us beyond given guilt-driven tokens; it calls us to bless the poor. What does it look like for you and your family this Christmas season? Is it time in service to the under-resourced? Is it a financial gift? What's your walking barefoot in the snow moment this Christmas? If you don't have one yet, can you consider something before year end? Or put something on the calendar for the new year?

Proverbs 14:21,31 It is a sin to belittle one's neighbor; blessed are those who help the poor. Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him. Proverbs 19:17 If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord— and he will repay you! Proverbs 22:9 Blessed are those who are generous, because they feed the poor.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 22

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

"Fear not," said he for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind.

“Glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind.”

Where is dread seizing your troubled mind this season?

I have a friend who was just laid off from his job this week. The uncertainty is troubling.

An acquaintance just learned a relative was the driver in a fatal accident. The trauma is dread-inducing.

Another friend is still dealing with the deep hurt dealing with a personal betrayal. The fear is that the wound won’t heal; the anger will never subside.

“Fear not.” It’s a recurring theme throughout the Christmas story. When an angel appears to Mary, its “don’t be afraid.” When an angel appears to Joseph, its “don’t be afraid.” When a crowd of angels appear to the shepherds, they say “fear not.” And this declaration has time/space layers to it.

Don’t be afraid here, now. This makes sense. No one in the story appears to have regular interactions with heavenly messengers. Apparently, none of these angels scheduled appointments for these appearances. They just ambush the mortals with their majesty and their message. Naturally, the angels calm the humans down so they can receive a message from God.

Don’t be afraid later, there. The angels aren’t delivering musical telegrams; they come with very specific instructions. To Mary: carry the Christ-child. To Joseph: stick with Mary. To the shepherds: go to Bethlehem and see this thing that God has done.

“Fear not.” It’s not a patronizing, calming gesture. It’s a contextualized encourage-ment. Don’t be afraid of the message; don’t be afraid to carry it out. The message isn’t “Don’t be afraid; everything’s going to go great.” Mary still faced an uncomfor-table trek to Bethlehem and never did get that private birthing suite for her delivery. Joseph had to navigate the scandal of Mary’s pregnancy and needed to help his wife and infant son flee to Egypt for their lives. The shepherds got to announce the first Christmas. And then, they got to go back to their financially uncertain, less than gla-morous, life of shepherding.

One author says courage is not the absence of fear, but rather it is “fear walking.” Everyone in the first Christmas story seems to put their mission in front of their fears. The good news of Christmas isn’t that fear is eliminated, but that Christ’s arrival em-boldens us to walk through it.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 23

For Unto Us A Child Is Born

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given,
and the government shall be upon His shoulder;
and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:5)

I know, I know. This doesn't seem like a line from a Christmas song. It's a Bible verse often associated with Christmas. But it's also the lyric to Scene 3, Part 1 of George Frederic Handel's Messiah. Every year our high school choir would sing this at the Christmas concert. All the choir alumni would join us in the bleachers for the grand finale: the Hallelujah chorus.

"Unto us." Christmas is a cosmic event. The Creator of the Universe suspends his heavenly majesty to join humanity as fully human, while remaining fully God. There's a famous line in John's gospel that says "For God so loved the world..." It can be easy to see the incarnation as a generic, abstract concept. But Isaiah doesn't say "God embraces humanity," he says "unto us a child is born." Christ isn't born for us or near us or at us, but to us.

Last week one of our neighbor's packages was delivered to our home. It arrived within ninety-five feet of its intended destination. Jesus doesn't land in the vicinity of our lives; he comes directly to us.

He comes now to bring awe-inspiring wisdom to every crisis we face. The writer James says if we ask God for wisdom and believe that it's coming, we are guaranteed to re-ceive it. And if Isaiah is right, that counsel will be perfect, wonderful.

He comes now to be Mighty God. Nothing is beyond his reach. He delivers, redeems, restores and heals. That's who God is and that's what God does. While it's easy to question God's methods, there's no challenging God's might.

He comes now as Everlasting Father. Not the insecure, autocratic dad. Not that "I need to re-live my glory days through my kids" dad. Not the workaholic, alcoholic, rage-aholic, you-name-it-aholic, "still wrestling my demons" dad. Not the absentee, deadbeat, only present for conception dad. He is Father. He is more than the conglo-merate of the best attributes of the best dads. He is perfect, steadfast and eternal Father.

He comes to us now as Prince of Peace. In the Bible, "peace" is not the absence of conflict, nor is it a version of "inner peace." It speaks to "wholeness"; it indicates that everything is exactly as it should be. Jesus is not an ambassador of this peace, but its champion: the Prince.

"Unto us." Wisdom to us, power to us, love to us, peace to us. There's no greater gift than the child that embodies all of these.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 24

Little Drummer Boy

Then, He smiled at me (pa-rum-pa-pum-pum)
Me and my drum

Katherine Kennicott Davis took some artistic liberties when she wrote this one in 1941. Everybody knows the ox and the lamb can't keep time to save their lives. Horses? Maybe. But oxen and sheep? No way.

And developmental experts tell us babies don't have a smile reflex until they're six to eight weeks old. The idea of an hours-old baby intentionally smiling at the drummer, let alone the drum, is a reach.

That said, I'm a sucker for a smiling baby. A baby's smile is kryptonite to the hardened cynic; it melts the hardened heart. We can all close our eyes and picture a smiling baby. A smiling God, however, is another story.

For years, I was stuck with a caricature of God in my mind. I knew God was capable of love; it just never showed on His face. God was an elderly, white-male in my childhood imagination. He had a furrowed brow and permanent scowl. Somewhere, somebody was screwing up. A detached and disappointed God was going to have to strike someone down, roll up God's heavenly sleeves and clean the whole mess up.

Let me clear: there are obviously behaviors and systems that trigger a just God's rage. As they should. That said, I don't believe furious is God's default demeanor. I think God smiles, a lot. Hard as it may be to believe, I'm convinced God smiles at you, even now.

We see God smile in the Advent story. He smiles at Mary; he is pleased in who she is and how she's living.

Luke 1:28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Thirty-some years later, we see God the Father smiling again, when Jesus is baptized.

Matthew 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

And again when Christ reveals His glory to a small circle of close friends Matthew 17:5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

It's easy to say "Of course God smiles at Mary, she's the mother of Christ. And yes, He's going to smile at Jesus. Jesus is never wrong. But I'm not Mary and I'm not Jesus."

Fair enough. But you are somebody God created and deeply loves. When He designed you, He did so with intentionality, creativity and purpose. It doesn't mean you're hitting all your marks or that God isn't going to ask you to tweak or overhaul certain parts of your life. It simply means you bring God joy.

Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with sin-ging."

Yes, he smiles at you.

Rum-pa-pum-pum.

Countdown to Christmas

DAY 25

When Love Comes to Town

Merry Christmas!

Today's version is a reprint from a piece I did for the Covenant Companion magazine in December 2013. The song that inspired it is "When Love Comes to Town," from U2's "Rattle and Hum" album. I hope you enjoy it.

We bought a new house this year. We really loved our last house, but since we moved there seven years ago our family has grown from four people to six. With only one child left in diapers, five of us were sharing a single bathroom, which was its own exercise in patience.

When we put our old house on the market we were excited about the prospect of moving, but the challenge of finding the "right house" was overwhelming. I remember sitting down with my wife, Kelly, and our realtor, Roger. Roger opened up the local real estate listing database and began his litany of questions. What neighborhoods or zip codes are you looking for? What kind of schools do you want for your kids? How many bedrooms? Baths? How old or new would you like the house to be? What style of home? What size lot? What's your price range?

Many of these were questions I had not even considered yet. But gradually we narrowed down the list of options from thousands to hundreds to a few dozen. The exciting part was actually walking through the homes to get a feel for what they were really like. The truth is some homes looked spectacular on paper, but as soon as we parked in front of them something didn't feel right. Why? Because it's not until you're standing in front of the house that you can see its context, that you get a feel for the neighborhood itself.

At the end of the day, when you move into a new place, you're not simply buying a residence— you're buying a stake in a neighborhood. Later I found out that as we were checking out our potential communities, our potential neighbors were screening us from their kitchen windows and back porches as well. Most people know both the joy of having great neighbors and the challenge of others who are, well, not so neighborly. What does any of this have to do with Christmas? John 1:14 tells us, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (NIV). Eugene Peterson frames it this way: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (The Message). The band U2 performed a song with blues legend B.B. King on their 1988 album Rattle and Hum entitled "When Love Comes to Town." According to the gospel writer, the incarnation, the miracle of Christmas, is the moment when loves moves into the neighborhood.

Many religions have a myth of a deity or deities who took field trips to the human realm. Not long ago I came across the film Clash of the Titans while flipping channels and recalled brief snippets of my high-school English teacher's overview of Greek mythology. The company of Greek gods resided on Mount Olympus and would only occasionally come down to engage the mortal world. They were, in a word, commuters. They preferred the option of being able to come and go as they pleased and had no desire to set up shop or "dwell among" the humans.

The incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, is a radical concept in light of the ancient Greeks' view of the world. For God to move into the neighborhood says something about the Creator's capacity and desire to connect with the creation. It also tells us something about the neighborhood. The neighborhood, not some ethereal realm, is where God does tangible and immediate work.

The writer of Hebrews declares that Jesus identifies with every dimension of the human experience. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been temp-ted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16, NIV).

Why is the fact that God comes near good news? And how should the reality of the incarnation shape our lives? Maybe it's simply a new (or re-newed) awareness of Christ's presence in all our daily challenges, both small and large.

I made a poor decision this year. In January I registered for a marathon and encouraged others from my church to join me in running for a charity team. The goal was to raise money for clean water initiatives operated by our ministry partners in northern Kenya. Then April came and I trained some. May brought a slight uptick in my workouts, but not nearly enough to stay on schedule. Life happened, I got lazy, and by the time race day came in late October, I was officially ill-equipped to run a full marathon. I had, however, raised some money for our cause and also roped a good number of people from our church into joining me. At that point, I kind of had to do it.

Two of my sisters graciously made the trip to Detroit from Chicago to help me through the first 13.1 miles. They were a true gift and an amazing help. It wasn't until about mile seventeen that the wheels started to come off. My body was aching and my mind started to unravel.

About that time three women from my church who were wearing shirts for our charity came running by. One said, "Hey Steve. We've brought a verse to read for every mile of the marathon. Want to hear it?"

I was already in a rough spot, and now I was embarrassed that my race strategy was not nearly as spiritual as theirs. Wincing, I nodded. With clarity and confidence she quoted Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

My eyes welled up. I had forgotten how true the words she quoted really are. Granted, it was my own dumb fault I was in this mess, but even so I needed to hear God say, "I will strengthen you and help you."

In the Greek model, the gods only visited the human world for significant events or on random whimsical escapades. The gods were both too important and too preoccu-pied to be concerned with the daily grind of mere mortals: traffic jams, dirty diapers, long-distance races. But the miracle of Christmas, the beauty of the incarnation, says otherwise. We don't have a Messiah who telegraphs encouragement from on high but rather the Word made flesh who runs alongside us when we are dismayed. A God who lives in my neighborhood doesn't have to fly in or come down when I'm discouraged—he is already here.

As a kid, I remember helping my dad light luminaries on Christmas Eve. We would go out into the garage and fill several small paper lunch bags with a trowel full of mostly frozen sand. Then we'd place a candle in each bag of sand, load them all up in our little wagon, and line both sides of our long sidewalk with them. Once they were all in place, we lit the candles. Many of our neighbors did the same, and by the time I went to bed on Christmas Eve it felt like the whole street was ablaze with light. I wasn't sure whether we were lighting the landing strip for Santa's sleigh or welcoming the Christ-child to our brick colonial home, but I vividly remember the light cutting the darkness like a razor.

It's easy to forget on the days that aren't Christmas that Christ offers to do the same for us every day. The other evening was a bad one for me. I was more stressed than I wanted to be, short with my children, and impatient with my ever loyal and incredible wife. Depressed and disappointed with myself, I retreated to our basement guest bedroom to be alone and decompress.

There in the dark, my four-year-old son crawled onto the bed next to me. After a few moments of shared silence, he quietly began to sing one single line: “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” There was more silence before, “Don’t let Satan blow it out, I’m going to let it shine.” Then quiet again. And ever so gently, “Hide it under a bushel, no! I’m going to let it shine.” In the voice of my son, the light of this Word made flesh was breaking through.

I’m not one to spend a lot of time focusing on the nature or presence of evil. That said, Jesus would not have commanded us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” if there were not, in fact, evil from which we need to be delivered. Whether we’re struggling with literal demons or simply our personal ones, the darkness can be very real indeed. Jesus’s desire to live in our neighborhood and step into the shadows we often stumble into is yet another evidence of transcendent grace.

When Jesus moved into the ancient town of Capernaum, on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, his neighbors felt a spiritual sunrise emerge from the chaos. “When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned’” (Matthew 4:12-16, NIV).

And if Jesus has relocated into the house next door, and I have eyes to perceive it, I should . see light breaking through as well—light bringing hope in the midst of difficult circumstances, mercy in the face of my failures, and grace to break the cycle of self-destructive patterns.

If Christmas is the celebration of the Word moving into the neighborhood, then maybe our mental image of the baby in the manger needs to expand. Yes, the nature of Jesus’s arrival as an infant in Bethlehem made him per-fectly accessible to the shepherds he came to proclaim his kingdom to. But because most of us don’t shepherd and have never seen an actual manger and may never get to Bethlehem, that image, while nostalgic, be-comes too abstract.

In order to grasp the power of the incarnation, where would we place the precious baby in our world? Does the Word come to a historic brownsto-ne? A wood and vinyl duplex? A bungalow near the tracks? An estate is a gated community? A shanty town in Durban, South Africa? Or a farmhouse in Iowa? A Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon? A high rise in Shanghai?Yes, yes, and yes. There is no neighborhood the Christ-child does not inha-bit. So this year, when we sing it, let’s sing it like we mean it: “Joy to the world. The Lord is come.”

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