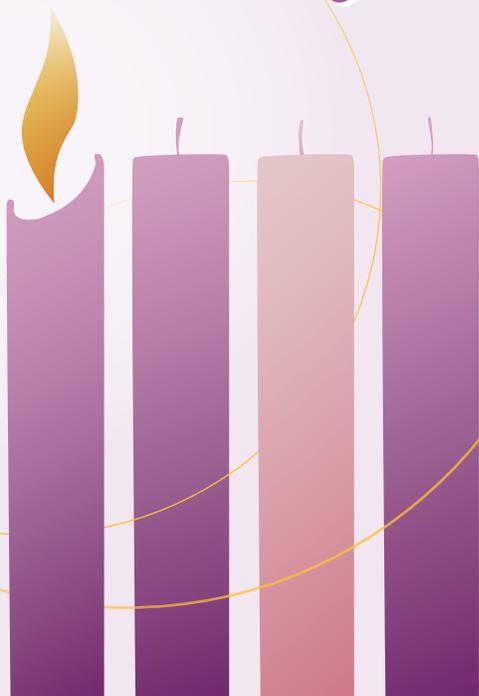


NIGHT WATCH
2021 ADVENT DEVOTIONS | WEEK 1
BY TERI McDOWELL OTT

Beauty



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28TH | GENESIS 1:1-5

I encourage you to begin this devotion series at night, outside if you can. That's where I am now — writing this on our back porch, my notebook lit with a small battery-powered lamp. I can't stay out too long. The crisp Illinois prairie wind will soon numb my fingers holding pen to paper. But I welcome the fresh scent of the night air and the nocturnal stirring of critters I never see during the day. The darkening sky invites me to behold the stars that ask, "What has kept you from the gifts of the night?"

I used to venture out at night more often. After the kids' bedtime, I'd walk through the grass, breathe deep and lean against a sturdy maple tree to look up and take in God's creation. I'm not sure what lured me from this spiritual practice (Netflix binges? The distractions of work?) But Advent is the perfect opportunity to return to the night.

The metaphor of darkness runs throughout the Bible — typically associated with evil and sin. But darkness does not mean the absence of God. When the sun disappears below the horizon, God doesn't vanish with it. The night is part of God's good creation.

Darkness is the chosen medium of artist James Turrell. Heather Lanier's essay "In Praise of Darkness" (Poets & Writers, 2018) describes one of Turrell's museum exhibits: "You enter by stepping into a narrow corridor — the only source of light is behind you — which quickly turns 180 degrees to the right. As you get farther along, the walls must be painted black because now the darkness is nearly complete. If you go alone, this is when you might seek out the handrail, flu season or not ... and let it guide you through another 180-degree turn. The darkness at this point becomes thick, almost palpable." Lanier continues to describe that the viewer of the exhibit eventually finds a chair and sits, waiting as long as 15 minutes for their irises to open sufficiently enough to perceive Turrell's work.

The belief that art and beauty await you in Turrell's work helps you walk into darkness, then wait. And in the darkness, beauty emerges. As Lanier describes it: "A faint, gray amorphous source of light. It's so faint at first you might not be able to place its shape. Circle? Oval? Blob? It's like a reflection of a reflection of light, like a moon of a moon."

The dark of night holds promise. Advent points us to this same promise: God is not absent when all appears dark. God waits with us as our eyes adjust to the beauty and meaning that can be found in the dark. The key is to believe that something is there — that something is here — for us, something good and beautiful. Something that is worth our patience.

As Advent begins, our nights stretch long. There is more darkness now than any other time of year. Let's walk together into the night to see what God reveals.

Holy God, help us to patiently walk with you and wait with you in the night so we can marvel at the beauty of your creation lit by moon and stars. Amen.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29TH | GENESIS 15:1-6

It's as impossible to count the stars in the sky as it is to count the blessings God bestows. This Advent, take some time to go outside at night and stargaze. Imagine the hope Abraham felt as God pointed his attention to the heavens and promised him a long line of descendants. Imagine moving from a state of barrenness to a state of fulfillment. What blessing has God shown you this past year? What blessing is God preparing you for this Advent?

God of uncountable blessings, your stars remind us of all we have been given and all that is still yet to come. Your promise to care for and protect us, our children and our children's children, illuminates the night sky with beauty and hope. In this season of Advent, we turn our eyes heavenward with Abraham to marvel at your faithfulness and praise you for all you provide. Amen.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30TH | EXODUS 10:21-24

In this Exodus story, God uses darkness to strike fear in Pharaoh's heart and protect the Israelites from those who seek to keep them enslaved. The Egyptians could not find the Israelites hidden by God's darkness. This Advent, find some quiet time to sit in the dark. We are often afraid of the dark because of the way it limits our vision. But can you experience the dark's protection like this passage suggests? What do you find comforting when all the lights are out? How is God seeking to protect and comfort you this Advent?

You cover and comfort us, Eternal God. We thank you for the darkness that reminds us of the ways you protect and provide for us. Help us to seek you, even when we cannot see. Help us to feel your presence among us this Advent. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1ST | PSALM 136:1-9

The moon and stars are a steady presence and a nightly reminder of the steadfast love of God. No matter what happens during the day, God's stars still shine. No matter what doubts or fears plague us, God's love for us never wavers. No matter the cruelty of the world, God is there every night, reminding us that love rises above all else. This Advent, spend some time praying in a place where you can view the moon and stars. This Advent, pause to remember and give thanks for God's steadfast love.

Beautiful Creator, we pause to praise you. Your steadfast love endures forever. The moon and the stars point us toward this truth. In a cruel and violent world, we are grateful for this nightly reminder that your way is love. In a world where we are so often brought low, the signs in your night sky raise us up. Thank you. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2ND | PSALM 148:1-3

A star praises God by being all that God created it to be. A star illuminates the night, directs wandering travelers and ships at sea, humbles us with the vastness of the universe beyond our planet, pokes holes in our dark loneliness and despair to let in a little light of hope, stokes the fires of our faith with a glimpse of what is beyond the beyond. This Advent, praise God by being who God created you to be.

Creator God, like the stars, we praise you, we appreciate you, we marvel at the gifts you offer and the beauty you have painted in the sky. When we need direction, remind us to look up. When we need humility, let the night sky remind us of how small we really are. When we need hope, guide our eyes from our base reality toward your beauty and being. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3RD | PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16

We are lights meant to shine in the world. This is who God created us to be. Paul reminds the Philippians that God is at work within and through them. The world can know of God by the way we illuminate injustice and work to overcome the darkness of evil and sin. The world can know of God as we reflect Christ's humility, love and desire to serve. As we move through this season of Advent, our mission becomes as clear as a cloudless night sky full of God's glory.

Let us shine! Let us shine! Let us shine! Inspiring God, you ignite us with passion and purpose. May we live as Christ lived. May we shed light on all that is wrong so we can clearly see how to work towards what is right. Illuminate us from within, Holy God, so we can shine like your stars in the world. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4TH | PSALM 104:19

Spring, summer, fall, winter. Morning, afternoon, evening, night. Childhood, youth, adulthood, older adulthood. Our days are marked by seasons. Our lives, by natural stages of development. This division of time adds interest and beauty to our days and reminds us of the preciousness and passing of life. We are not God. We begin and end. The church's seasons also mark time as sacred and precious. As the beginning of the church year, Advent calls us back to our faith to prepare us for Christ's birth. As the winter moon fills the sky this December, mark this time by praising God for the gift of Jesus Christ born into this precious and passing life.

We praise you, God, for the variety of each season, the beauty of each stage of life. We praise you, Holy One, for the Christ child, born into our human, fleshy, worldly reality, to save us and set us free. Amen.