

A Season of Little Sacraments

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Christmas Commotion, Advent Grace

Susan H. Swetnam



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This book is dedicated to
the Sisters at the Monastery of St. Gertrude,
Cottonwood, Idaho,
friends and mentors who demonstrate how to live
every day in joyful hope.

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Introduction



Inviting the Sacramental into an Ordinary, Jam-Packed, Over-Committed Twenty-First-Century Advent

The lament swells every December, as perennial as the jingle of Salvation Army bells. We've lost "the reason for the season" and have "taken Christ out of Christmas," media commentators and evangelical preachers proclaim. The secular trappings of Christmas—shopping, decorating, partying—have come to dominate our culture so conclusively, these critics contend, that few of us even remember the sacred gift we're celebrating. We need to get back to the basics of faith, to focus on church rather than on these distractions.

Several years ago an idealistic young priest in my Idaho parish embraced this theme with purist zeal. He issued a directive on the feast of Christ the King: we should wait until Christmas to engage in Christmas-y activities. Making an Advent wreath to welcome the season was fine, he granted, but all other decorations—Christmas lights, trees, any form of hall-decking—shouldn't happen before Christmas Eve day. Christmas cards should be sent and delivered during Christmas itself (the canonical period beginning with December 25) and *not* during Advent. Shopping and fancy holiday cooking (unavoidable barnacles on

the season, he conceded) should be delayed until the week before Christmas at the earliest.

What should we be doing in the meantime? Coming to church for daily mass as well as on Sundays, walking the Stations of the Cross and eating meager meals on Fridays, holding at least twice-daily devotionals in our homes, purifying ourselves by various kinds of sacrifices. In the early church, he explained, Advent was a period of solemn preparation, a time of fasting and prayer. "It's Advent-as-Lent," one of my friends remarked. She was all in favor of a faith-filled season, she said, but in her opinion such austerity secured Christ's place in December at the expense of joyful anticipation.

We're a parish serious about its faith, one with strong attendance at Mass and at adult theology sessions. We welcome many new members every Easter. We maintain a strong roster of lay ministers and engage in an extensive program of social justice. Still, you can probably imagine the kind of compliance rate our priest achieved both for the things we should have done and for the things we should have left undone. Though many of us did embrace at least some of the practices he suggested, ultimately the prospect of foregoing the pleasure of all modern Christmas preparations proved too much of a challenge. I've always suspected that the poor guy didn't get invited to too many homes during the four weeks of Advent that year, given the guilty evidence of non-compliance I witnessed and compiled in my own home.

That idealistic priest and other critics of twenty-first century Advent do have a point, of course, as anybody who has ever turned on a television on Black Friday must agree. Unseemly shopping frenzies embody the antithesis of "peace on earth"; enticements to spend more every year on gifts not only distract

us but lead many into dangerous debt. Season-themed television shows, popular songs, and decorations often ignore the real Christmas. Attempting to replicate the material trappings of a perfect holiday as featured in magazines, we tax our resources and energy. We become irritated, anxious, and uncharitable as the season progresses. Hoping to create the idyllic tableaux of family and personal happiness the media suggests are “normal,” we feel frustration with loved ones, depression, self-doubt, and envy when reality does not measure up.



A host of Advent devotional books have appeared in past decades from theologians, priests, monastics, popular religious writers, and editors who compile the words of saints or church fathers. These volumes seek to remind us that there’s another Advent behind the commercial Christmas frenzy. Drawing on liturgical scriptural readings and/or specific religious observances within Advent’s calendar, like the Feast of St. Lucy or the presentation of Mary in the temple, such works emphasize that Advent should be a season of reverent (and also joyful) waiting, hope, and contemplation of the mystery of Christ’s incarnation. Each day readers are invited to join the writers in prayerfully considering the implications of the particular week’s texts. These writers put scriptural words into historical, biblical, theological, sociological, and comparative religion contexts; some offer workbook-style questions to inspire the reader’s meditation and prayer.

This book also aims to help readers stay awake spiritually in this great season of preparation, but it takes an alternate (some might even think radical) approach to Advent faith formation. Though the chapters that follow certainly allude to the season’s

ageless and enduring liturgical texts, they stake their ground where most twenty-first-century laypeople *actually live* during Advent, like it or not: in the heart of December's commotion. Those who are fortunate enough to be able to go on retreat or who belong to particular religious orders might be able to escape the month's onslaught of secular Christmas pressure, but the vast majority of us are fooling ourselves if we think we can. Even if we adopt a purist approach to Advent we must, at the very least, go out to work and/or to shop for groceries or other necessities, encountering along the way a culture possessed by holiday craziness.

As this book seeks to demonstrate, however, contemplative isolation is not the only way to live a spiritually-rich Advent. Indeed, my own experience suggests that if we can keep our eyes open and cultivate a reflective habit of mind, the events of ordinary daily life may become rich catalysts for devotional meditation. Even the material rituals of preparing for Christmas—the very “distractions” that are accused of removing Christ from the celebration—can constitute gateways to deeper faith. They can invite us into the heart and soul of Advent's core themes: waiting in patience and hope; acknowledging our own vulnerability, brokenness, and need; reaching to others in a spirit of common humanity; and cultivating joy in the promise of Christ's coming and the assurance of God's essential love.

The idea that the mundane and the sacred can interpenetrate is hardly a new concept in our faith, especially regarding this time of year. Advent, after all, is in its essence about contemplating the mystery of the incarnation. Christ assumes human flesh and enters our sphere, the very domain that includes all the messy joy of December's preparations. This is the same earthly context that

once included men who fished from small boats and got their feet dusty as they walked rough roads, a world where women could become so preoccupied with housework that they didn't pay enough attention to an honored guest. People once encountered Jesus in mundane earthly settings, and his grace can still extend into the ordinary secular rush of our lives if we open our ears, our eyes, our hearts to him in the midst of such daily business.

The intersection of the sacred and secular has been a popular theme in religious art across the centuries. The juxtaposition is patently unavoidable in depictions of the annunciation, that central Advent story in which the angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary and announces that she is to bear God's son. This subject was especially popular in the Italian Renaissance, a period when exclusively sacred topics of composition began to give way to secular themes. In their depictions of the annunciation, the era's artists might be said to have split the difference. The subject is canonical; the angel is marvelously supernatural. Yet the Virgin appears not just as an earthly woman but in everyday period settings. The Mary of Italian Renaissance painting walks on a loggia porch, sits in a parlor among ordinary domestic trappings, or is interrupted while she reads or does handiwork. The corollary today might be Mary unloading the dishwasher or texting.

Among my favorites in the Mary-interrupted line are the paintings of Florentine artist Alessandro Allori, which show Mary receiving the news while knitting or making lace. Startled by Gabriel, the Virgin has dropped her work onto the floor. All knitters (like me) will be able to identify with an evocative implication of that minor circumstance: once the angel goes back to wherever it is that angels live and the woman in the picture retrieves the piece, she'll certainly have lost her place in the

pattern and will most likely discover that she's dropped stitches. As she struggles to take in the monumental new start announced by the angel, she'll discover that she has to begin again in small aspects of her life, too.

We may not be ready for the angel who informs us that God has a plan that will revolutionize our lives. The revelation may come at an inconvenient time. But the ordinary, daily round of life is our sphere, and so that is where the call will come. The mystery and the mundane are inextricably intertwined.



The seven great sacraments provide formal and communal opportunities for Catholics to encounter that mystery and receive God's grace. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that "the visible rites" of baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, holy orders, matrimony, reconciliation, and the anointing of the sick "signify and make present the graces proper to each" (1131). They "give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith" (1210). To participate in them is to gain special access to Christ.

Modern theologians have suggested that the receipt of grace is not reserved exclusively for moments in church, however. Encountering Christ "is also at the heart of the specifically human and secular activities that predominate in our lives," writes Jesuit Michael J. Taylor in his introduction to *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology*. "Grace 'happens' when human life is lived and celebrated authentically."

Working from that premise, this book considers the ordinary "distractions" of contemporary December as potential "little sacraments": opportunities to touch the divine and move closer

into alignment with our authentic nature as God's children. Its chapters invite readers along on a very ordinary walk through December, encouraging them by narrative example and reflection to imagine their own seasonal "distractions" as opportunities for the particular sacred graces of Advent to break into their lives. Each chapter is sparked by a twenty-first century component of Christmas preparation and considers an important liturgical theme for the season. These juxtapositions mirror what I (the ordinary woman in question, a Catholic middle-class teacher, writer, and widow living a few miles from a university town in southeastern Idaho) have discovered over many years of seeking to experience Advent with reverent open eyes: that the secular occurrences of our lives, no less than the "churchy" ones, can bring us closer to God.

Most of the chapters that follow are grounded in seasonal activities with which readers will be familiar, including decorating, choosing gifts, braving the stores and traffic, sending Christmas cards, making impossibly ambitious to-do lists, and hosting gatherings large and small. But there are also few chapters that chronicle distinctive, even idiosyncratic, customs of my own. My aim in the range of choices is not to present a universal template for a specific December regimen or to instruct readers in thinking exactly as I do about the particulars of a twenty-first century Advent. Instead I hope that this book will strike at least a few "I've been there"-style chords, suggest new practices readers might want to try, and most of all invite readers to reflect prayerfully for themselves about the sacred implications of their own round of Christmas preparations.

Throughout I intend to demonstrate that it is not as difficult as it might seem to approach real-world seasonal activities with

attention to their spiritual ramifications. One only has to pay attention to Advent's call, for God will work with us if we go even a small way out to meet him. We require not perfection in observance but persistence in recalling ourselves to a listening habit of mind after the inevitable slips of attention. It is not too taxing to take just a few times a week to read the season's liturgy and perhaps other texts like this one. Through the practice of prayer or journaling one may build the habit of reflecting consciously on what has happened in the round of daily life. Even baby steps toward staying awake may provide opportunities to live the season reverently, as it is meant to be lived.

Ideally, of course, we might live that way every day, walking mindfully through a world crackling with potential insight. Perhaps some people do—people for whom living and meditating on God's wisdom have become one, for whom reflecting is as natural as breathing not just in Advent, but in all life's seasons.

That's not me, though, and I'm guessing it's not going to be most readers either. Still, one has to begin somewhere. And where better than at the start of the church year, a period when we're explicitly invited to prepare the way of the Lord?

Walk with me through the ordinary, jam-packed, over-committed, distracting, and *sacred* days of a twenty-first century Advent.

Week 1



Opening to a Season
of Longing and Hope

1

Committing to Attention



Making an Advent Playlist

“You listen to Christmas music even when you run?” a friend asked recently as we discussed our respective workout plans for the coming winter. “That’s seriously high tolerance. I always get sick of Christmas music weeks before Christmas arrives—it’s on the radio, playing in the grocery stores. You can’t check the weather on television without hearing it. It was even playing at the dentist’s office when I got my teeth cleaned last week. I’m about done already with ‘Silent Night’ and ‘Joy to the World’ and ‘Sleigh Ride’ for this year.”

Not Christmas music, I explained. What I’d said was that I always make a playlist of *Advent* music for my December runs.

“Advent music?” She looked puzzled. “What’s Advent?”



Advent is such a fixture of the calendar in liturgical Christian churches that it can be surprising to realize that the season is not observed by all sects that consider themselves Christian (my friend’s faith tradition is among the latter). Arriving at the start of the church year in late November or the first Sunday of

December, Advent constitutes its own sacred season, a four-week interval distinct from Christmas. It's a time of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ. It's a quiet season compared to the great festival that follows, a period when believers are instructed to wait in confident hope, cultivating attention, repentance, charity, and joy.

In the Catholic Church Advent entails its own distinctive rituals. We light an additional candle each Sunday on a wreath of four, for example; we eschew the "Gloria" until Christmas. It brings its own special liturgical readings and violet vestment colors (with rose introduced on the third Sunday—Gaudete Sunday—to signify the joyful anticipation voiced in the Scripture readings). Dearest to my heart among the customs that set Advent apart, however, is its music.

Life would be so much poorer without the songs of Advent—those at-once yearning and joyful strains that mark late November, early and mid-December. Only at this time of year do we hear the cluster of hymns at the very front of the music section of the missal, songs that blend solemn minor keys with encouraging, even confidently peaceful texts. To sing them is to enter into community with many generations of the faithful, many cultures. "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" and "On Jordan's Bank" offer an echo of the eighteenth century. "The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns" reprises an early nineteenth-century Kentucky tune. "See How the Virgin Waits for Him" is set to a traditional Slovakian folk melody and "The Angel Gabriel" to a Basque one. Even the more recently composed Advent hymns sound exotic with their archaic language and rich musical settings: "Come Watch and Wait" and "Beyond the Moon and Stars," for instance.

I, for one, get lonesome for these songs in other seasons. Sometimes in the late summer or early fall, when Ordinary Time can seem extremely ordinary, I feel nostalgia for the drama of their proper season and sneak a peek at them in the missal when I should be concentrating on something else. I'm never "done with them" when we transition to the hymns of Christmas on the night of December 24.

So great is my hunger for these songs that I've been making an Advent playlist for my iPod for the past decade. Yes, I confess: though I'm a woman of a certain age, I've become one of those annoying people who go around the world with little plugs in their ears, listening to music that no one else can hear. Once upon a time I railed at such people, complaining that they had cut themselves off from reality, pitying them for losing the chance to really be here, now. Lately, though, I've come to believe that sometimes it's good to step back—even while engaged in the actual practice of walking (or running) around the planet earth—from the "here" of external details into the internal focus that music can provide.

I listen to my playlist just about every day during Advent, during daily runs that become mini-retreats. Most often those workouts take place in the early morning or at dusk in the national forest a mile beyond my southeastern Idaho home, on a quiet two-lane road that stretches through a canyon beside a dancing creek. When the press of obligations at the regional university where I teach English necessitates lunchtime exercise, I traverse the streets around campus.

Every year's playlist is new, built on Christ-the-King weekend. The process is vastly enjoyable, a happy here-we-go-over-the-falls-into-Advent personal ritual. There's a lot of prospecting on Pandora and in the iTunes store, much importing of songs from

seasonal CDs purchased the previous year, a reunion with and rediscovery of old favorites. The sequence gets tinkered with until it's just right. When in doubt, a song always makes the cut.

The selection is shaped by the flavor that life has assumed in that particular year. Instrumentals have dominated lately since they provide more space for meditation, and for the past few Advents responsibilities have filled my days with distracting noise. In the past when life was quieter songs with words appeared in greater proportion.

The list for this year—the year in which I'm compiling these reflections and writing this book—represents a mixture. It's heavy on peaceful piano versions of traditional Advent hymns played by Jeff Bjorck, Vicky Emerson, and others, but it also includes noncanonical Advent-style music, meditative winter compositions by David Lanz and various Wyndham Hill artists. There are varied voices on the playlist, too. A few years ago a Benedictine nun introduced me to Richard Souther's "Vision," a setting of Hildegard of Bingen's music that manages to sound simultaneously postmodern and medieval, and selections from that CD have since appeared annually. Bits of the earliest solos and choruses from Handel's *Messiah* punctuate the instrumentals (not the "Halleluiahs Chorus," though—I'm a purist, and that's Easter music!). Choral versions of regular Advent hymns that we sing in church appear on the list, as do Alison Krauss's version of "In the Bleak Midwinter" and some appropriate bluegrass songs.



Despite the yearly variations, two selections have been consistent from the list's birth. I imagine that everyone who loves music has songs like this, melodies and words that have become anthems,

cadences that take a person back to times of joy or sorrow. In the case my Advent playlist, one is contemporary vocalist Amy Grant's "Breath of Heaven [Mary's Song]," a Christian radio hit that helped save my life during the third Advent after my husband Ford died of cancer. Taking big theological chances, its words imagine what Mary might have been thinking during her pregnancy. The Mary of the song is exhausted and struggling with feelings of unworthiness; she fears that God may be having second thoughts about choosing her. Nevertheless, true to the biblical words of the *Magnificat* she offers herself humbly, acknowledging God's ultimate wisdom though she cannot understand why he has done what he has. With simple faith she vows to trust and to carry on.

Back in December of 2004 the initial shock of my husband's death had long since worn off and I entered Advent exhausted, angry, depressed, and beginning to fear that such feelings would never abate. The radio's unrelentingly cheerful pop Christmas songs depicted a holiday in which everybody seemed to be reveling together and kissing in the snow. That year even the carols in church hurt, for they invited comparison to past holidays. I'm afraid that I focused on the references to "toiling along the climbing way" and "suffering, sighing, bleeding, dying" instead of the ultimate promises behind those travails.

I felt as though I were looking into the bright windows of normal life from raw winter darkness outside, a spare part, a woman now of no consequence to anyone. I lived alone, a fifty-year-old childless widow, a continent's distance from my mother and siblings (though richly blessed with friends). Graduate study had led me from a childhood home in the Philadelphia suburbs first to Newark, Delaware, and then to Ann Arbor, Michigan. A tenure-track job had brought me to southeastern Idaho. Though

I'd never been west of Kalamazoo when I arrived for the interview, I knew as soon as the plane banked for landing and the mountain ranges framing the city came into view that Pocatello would be home. After Ford and I met and married, I assumed that we'd live together in this landscape that spoke with such clarity to both of our spirits for many, many years, until we were both decrepit, though I couldn't imagine what that would be like.

All of my cherished plans for the future had crumbled. Even in the worst early days I never entertained the thought of moving away, certainly not back to the east coast. After living in the West, the place where I grew up seems claustrophobic. But how—and why—was I to live without my husband? The church suggested that what had happened was part of God's plan, but I wanted none of it.

Then I met the Mary in "Breath of Heaven." Though the song had been released a decade earlier, it only came to my ears via the car radio that year, a circumstance which might in itself inspire meditation. This Mary was complicated, human, lonely, and yet blessed. This Mary could entertain doubts, yet she remained faithful to the path assigned her. To do God's will, this version of the story suggests, you don't have to feel confident in your capacity to please him. Neither do you have to *like* the hand that God has dealt you. You just have to trust and do the work that's your portion—to "proclaim the greatness of the Lord" even though you cannot begin to understand his ways. "Breath of Heaven" reached viscerally to me that year, and even though I'm now on much firmer ground its message remains relevant.



The other perennial feature of my Advent playlist is that most venerable of Advent hymns, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Its ninth-century words and fifteenth-century chant-style music evoke an ancient longing for God's presence. "O come, O come," we intone at the beginning of each of the myriad verses, inviting the Savior as we name him through a series of mysterious honorifics, properly called "O Antiphons." We are, we admit, a captive and exiled people desperate for ransoming, mere humans who need God to "order[] all things mightily," to "close the path to misery," and to help us triumph over death.

As we voice the words of this hymn, we briefly construct ourselves as pre-incarnation people, people for whom this whole salvation thing is still provisional—even though our faith and theology ensure that we know better. We become humble creatures yearning for God to redeem us. This is not a song for people who have been "born again," people certain of their virtue, their worthiness in God's eyes. It's a song for those of us who know that we need grace.



Such reflections on acquiescence and trust might seem more appropriately pursued in a cloister or during a structured Advent retreat than while engaged in running around the world dressed in high-tech, twenty-first-century sports fabrics, watching out for cars and curbs and wildlife, checking time and pace on a fancy Garmin watch. It's a weird form of multitasking, I admit, one that might be considered a bit sacrilegious. Shouldn't a person make pristine time utterly apart in this season?

Well, yes, and those of us who actively practice our religion inevitably spend at least some such time in the normal course of Advent observance. We attend Sunday masses, adore the Blessed Sacrament, and participate in reconciliation. We might read

devotionals instead of the newspaper with breakfast. Setting apart *substantial every-day time* for personal reflection, though, can prove to be a very difficult commitment. I know that I struggle to honor such an intention in practice, even though I'm a childless widow whose responsibilities include only work, housekeeping, and cultivating friendships, not also caring for a spouse and children.

I've discovered, though, that when such devotion is combined with an ingrained habit it is more likely to become part of a daily routine. I find that making my workout sessions into meditation periods dedicates at least one hour six days a week to absorption in holy concerns. Thus the Advent playlist and the commitment to simultaneous care of body and soul. It's better to invite a daily hour of reflection in that imperfect way, I've come to believe, than to forego the opportunity because it's not pristine.



According to the foundational twentieth-century papal letter on sacred music, *Tra le sollecitudini*, issued by Pope Pius X in 1903, the genre should “rouse[] the faithful to devotion, and better [dispose them] to gather to themselves the fruits of grace which come from the celebration of the sacred mysteries.” As a conservative reformer seeking to purify the Roman Rite from popular or merely theatrical music, Pius might well look askance at some of the individual selections that form my daily Advent soundtrack. He might also disapprove of the circumstances (divorced from liturgical worship) of the delivery. Still, I hope that he'd be sympathetic to the intent.

Many pastoral documents affirming the efficacy of music in faith formation have followed *Tra le sollecitudini*. One of the

most important was *Liturgical Music Today*, published in 1972 by the members of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (USA). This statement affords sacred music a privileged place in worship, noting that it “does not serve as a mere accompaniment, but as the integral mode in which the mystery is proclaimed and presented.”



Out there on the chilly Idaho roads in December the mystery is proclaimed continuously through those earbuds; the devotion is roused as naturally as breathing.

An *Advent* playlist? How can any even marginally tech-saavy Christian live without one?