

## INTRODUCTION

*Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spend enough time with the tiniest creature, even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.*

—Meister Eckhart



When our first son was a toddler I wanted to add an Advent calendar to our family's Advent practices. Before his birth we had already begun to take back late November and December from "the holiday season," doing a few things that, though very simple, startled family and friends. We'd given up colored lights and Christmas decorations for four candles on an Advent wreath, only putting the decorations up, with the tree, on Christmas Eve. We waited until then, too, to sing or play or listen to Christmas carols, keeping quiet except to sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" each evening around the lit wreath. Now and then someone dared to ask us why our home was so un-Christmasy. More people asked more pointedly after our son was born—as if we were denying him some essential of childhood.

We decided to strip down and step back after I read a few paragraphs in a rather dry tome on the history of Christian liturgy. Those paragraphs worked in me like fingers lining up the cylinders of a lock. I still remember the *click* when that internal lock popped open.

I learned that the roots of Advent run deep beneath the Christian church—in the earth and its seasons. Late autumn, in the northern hemisphere, brings the end of the growing season. When early agricultural peoples had harvested their crops and stacked food in their larders, they gave a collective sigh of relief. Their long days in the fields were over. For their labor they had heaps of fruits, vegetables, grains, and meat. The group body called out, *Feast!*

At the same time, no matter how glad the party, they couldn't keep from glancing at the sky. Their growing season was over because the sun had retreated too far south to keep the crops alive. Each day throughout the fall they watched the light dwindle, felt the warmth weaken. It made them anxious, edgy. Their fires were no substitute for the sun. When they had eaten up the crop they were feasting on, how would another crop grow? Throughout December, as the sun sank and sank to its lowest point on their horizon, they felt the shadow of primal fear—fear for survival—crouching over them. They were feasting, and they were fearful, both. Yes, last year the sun had returned to their sky. But what if, this year, it didn't? Despite their collective memory, people wedded, bodily, to the earth couldn't help asking the question. Their bodies, in the present tense, asked the question.

Our bodies still ask that question. In December the dark and cold deepen, and our rational minds dismiss it as nothing. We *know* that on December 21, the winter solstice, the sun will begin its return to our sky. But our animal bodies react with dis-ease. We feel, *The light—life—is going*. Those particularly afflicted know themselves as SAD—Seasonal Affective Disorder—sufferers. Some of us

cope by seizing distractions the marketplace gleefully offers: shopping, parties, more shopping.

To be sure, some part of “the holiday season” is celebration of the harvest, for us, as it was for our ancestors, even if our personal harvest doesn’t involve crops and barns. We throw a party to mark the end of another year and all it’s brought. We do this in a big, bright, loud way. But for us also, as for our ancestors, the dark end of the year brings unrest. It is an end. It comes without our asking and makes plain how little of life’s course we control. This uncertainty, we don’t know how to mark. And so it marks us. We feel weighted, gloomy even, and we feel guilty because voices everywhere in myriad ways sing out, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.”

The church history book that got hold of me told me that my own annual December sadness was no reason for guilt. It was a sign of being wide awake in the world, awake enough to sense loss. And furthermore, there was a way to engage that sadness. That way was Advent.

The early Fathers of the Christian church read the ebbing of light and heat and vegetable life each year as a foreshadowing of the time when life as we know it will end completely. That it will end is the rock-bottom truth we sense deep in our primal bones every December, and it rightly terrifies us. To their and our abiding fear of a dark ending, the church spoke of an *adventus*: a coming. Faith proclaimed, *When life as we know it goes, this year and at the end of all years, One comes, and comes bringing a new beginning.*

Advent, to the Church Fathers, was the right naming of the season when light and life are fading. They urged the faithful to set aside four weeks to fast, give, and pray—all ways to strip down, to let the bared soul recall what it knows beneath its fear of the dark, to know what Jesus called “the one thing necessary”: that there is One who is the source of all life, One who comes to

be with us and in us, even, especially, in darkness and death. One who brings a new beginning.



This is Christian tradition at its best, moving in step with creation. When the sun's light and heat wane, the natural world lets lushness fall away. It strips down. All energy is directed to the essentials that ensure survival. Engaging in Advent's stripping practices—fasting, giving away, praying—we tune into the rhythms humming in the cells of all creatures living in the northern hemisphere. We tune into our own essential rhythms.

So when I wanted to add an Advent calendar to our practice, I looked for one that would, like fasting, giving away, and praying, help us enjoin earth's seasonal rhythm. The ones at Christian bookstores featured a thumbnail-sized cast of the Nativity behind the daily doors. Better than pictures of candy canes and gift packages. But I was looking for daily miniatures that were less about Christ's human birth and more about the *need* for that birth. I wanted my little boy, opening each door, to sense that Advent is about darkness—and hope, fear—and hope, loss—and hope.

Pregnant with my second child, I set about making an Advent calendar. The pictures I found myself drawing behind the little cut-out doors were of creatures. Behind door number one, a turtle at the bottom of a pond. Behind door number two, a diamond-skinned snake. Then a loon, a wild goose, a bear, a doe, a crow . . . As a companion to the calendar I made a little book. Each December day after Kai opened a door, I read a bit of a poem or song or natural history that linked the creature behind that door to the heart of Advent: "Turtle is buried now in mud at the bottom of the pond. Encased in darkness, she is utterly still. She waits. . . ."

I drew a turtle behind the door of December 1 because, days before, my son's godmother had sent me her meditation on turtle as a symbol of the soul in its dark season. And because I knew my son, like all children, liked pictures of animals.

That was more than twenty Advents ago. Both boys still come home some days in Advent. We still open a calendar door and read about the animal for that day. They still want me to ask the only question I've ever asked at the end of the reading: *Why do we have a turtle on our Advent calendar? Why a bear? Why a loon?*

Looking at the animal portraits year after year shows us how a healthy soul responds to encroaching darkness. And there's more than one response. There's the turtle response, the loon response, black bear's response. . . . When that primal fear of the dark—of the end—begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer unfearful responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in amazing and ingenious ways. They shape themselves to life as it is given.

Some of the animal portraits here are elaborations of ones on our family Advent calendar. Others are of animals I've come to know since making it. All twenty-four enact heart and soul realities for us. Each in its way says: *The dark is not an end, but a door. This is the way a new beginning comes.*

The practice of Advent has always been about helping us to grasp the mystery of a new beginning out of what looks like death. Other-than-human creatures—sprung, like us, from the Source of Life—manifest this mystery without question or doubt. The more I'm with animals and the more I learn about them, the more I know they can be more than our companions on this planet. They can be our guides. They can be to us “a book about God . . . a word of God,” the God who comes, even in the darkest season, to bring us a new beginning.



ADVENT 1

# Painted Turtle



The day is bright and warm for December 1, but the logs in the marsh pond are bare. Spring to summer into early fall they served, on sunny days, as spa to a dozen or so painted turtles. I would see them basking, splay-legged, stretching their leathery necks out full length, avid for every luscious atom of sunlight and sun-warmth.

Out of sight now, they've not escaped the harsher cold that's coming.

The water is maybe waist-deep in this pond, but a murky soup, clogged with roots and plants. One day in the fall, as water and air cooled, at some precise temperature an ancient bell sounded in the turtle brain. A signal: *Take a deep breath*. Each creature slipped off her log and swam for the warmer muck bottom. Stroking her way through the woven walls of plant stems, she found her bottom place. She closed her eyes and dug into the mud. She buried herself.

And then, pulled into her shell, encased in darkness, she settled into a deep stillness. Her heart slowed—and slowed—almost to stopping. Her body temperature dropped—and stopped just short of freezing. Now, beneath a layer of mud, beneath the weight of frigid water and its skin of ice and skim of snow, everything in her has gone so still she doesn't need to breathe. And anyway, the

iced-over pond will soon be empty of oxygen. Sunk in its bottom-mud, for six months she will not draw air into her lungs. To survive a cold that would kill her, or slow her so that predators would kill her, she slows herself beyond breath in a place where breath is not possible.

And waits. As ice locks in the marsh water and howling squalls batter its reeds and brush, beneath it all she waits. It is her one work, and it is not easy. Oxygen depletion stresses every particle of her. Lactic acid pools in her bloodstream. Her muscles begin to burn—her heart muscle, too, a deadly sign. That acid has to be neutralized, and calcium is the element to do it. Out of her bones, then out of her shell, her body pulls calcium, slowly dissolving her structure, her shape, her strength. But to move to escape—requiring breath—in a place where there is no oxygen—that would suffocate her. So, though she is dissolving, every stressed particle of her stays focused on the silver bead of utter quietude.

It's this radical simplicity that will save her. And deep within it, at the heart of her stillness, something she has no need to name, but something we might call trust: that one day, yes, the world will warm again, and with it, her life.



# Muskrat



Sitting up and hunched forward like a precision jeweler, the muskrat guides the tender stem end of a cattail into his mouth, long-clawed front paws holding, peeling, chewing, all at the same time, fast and ravenous. When he gets to the tough part, he tosses it aside, takes another from his pile, and bites.

I admired him a long time on a brilliant early morning last summer at the edge of the pond, admired his voracious yet meticulous eating—eating with a purpose. That purpose, I first supposed, was to pack away as many calories as possible and live off fat reserves when the cattails age into brown husks, when ice seals up the pond, and when the dimly lit days invite a long nap.

But muskrat is no winter napper. He's apt to be swimming under the ice cap this very minute, his tail—flattened vertically, like a belt on edge—propelling him just as swiftly and deftly as in summer, thanks to an ingenious recalibration of body chemistry that enables his blood to carry and his muscles to store more oxygen in winter. Flesh and blood rich in oxygen, wrapped in a luxuriant double-layered fur coat that traps an insulating air pocket next to his skin and repels water from without, he is an avid frigid-water swimmer. As he needs to be.



Unlike his cousin the northern beaver, he has stored no food for winter. But his busy metabolism every day drives him to eat the equivalent of a third of his body weight in fresh vegetation. So today and every winter day he has no choice but to dive beneath the ice for the plants that still grow on the bottomlands.

Able-bodied as he is for this, the icy water rapidly saps his heat and strength. He has to surface in the middle of the pond to warm up. So from beneath the ice he's built a refuge—a push-up, it's called—by pushing sticks and stalks up through cracks in the ice into a heap, a mound. He pushes his body up into the mounded shelter, shakes his fur dry and shivers to raise his body temperature. He allows others to join him—even non-kin—for the precious extra heat of a group huddle. If he feels too weak to dive, he may eat some of his shelter from the inside—though always with an eye on the walls' thickness; he can't risk opening it to the winter wind.

It's a little breathing room, this heap of sticks on the pond ice. A dark little room, like his dark little den dug into the pond bank. Retreating to his dark rooms to rest and breathe—sometimes alone, often with others—this is how he survives the months of cold that can stop his plucky, industrious heart. Warmed, invigorated there, with a flick of his tail he dives sleek and quick to the very bottom, where fresh food always grows.

ADVENT 3

# Black Bear



Walking the northern Michigan hardwoods where I was raised, restless, I make myself stand still. Somewhere in these eight hundred acres a black bear is sunk in sleep. A month ago already, beneath some fallen tree or stump, she dug a den rounded to the curl of her body. She raked bits of bark and grass over its floor and eased herself in. I crouch, close my eyes, and imagine that ball of furred muscle lax and loose somewhere nearby.

For weeks before she lay herself down, her whole self had been shifting, making ready for another life. Late in summer, just when most berries and nuts ripen, she grew ravenous. Seven, eight hours a day she camped in wild raspberry, blackberry, gooseberry, and huckleberry patches, pawing and licking fruit into her mouth, then, to rest, dropping to her belly and breathing in the fallen gems. Cloyed of sweet, she sniffed out savory—jewelweed, swamp thistle, cattail, and saxifrage—snacking on yellow jackets, ants, and beetle larvae along the way, finishing the day in a grove of beechnuts or hazelnuts or hickory nuts—tripling, even quadrupling her usual day's calorie intake. Still the trustworthy voice inside her urged, *Eat, eat more!*



Lush, warm, the Indian summer days were lost on her. Her gaze was fixed ahead, her every move food-purposed, her intention fierce and singular. Until the voice prompted an utter turnaround. *Let go*, it said. *Go limp*.

The nut trees and berry bushes are skeletons now. Crouched in the snow-muffled quiet I imagine hearing her slow breathing. I imagine smelling slow-burning bear—the fat she made from all those nuts, berries, bugs, and plants melting and fueling her sleep. She is shrinking—except in the den deep inside her body. There she is multiplying, balls of cells swelling into new forms of her.

Maybe she dreams of the life growing inside her. Did she foresee it all the while she ate and grew, ate and grew? Did she perceive it when she lay down? Whatever hints—or none—she had of its purpose, she knew absolutely a compelling urge. She obeyed that urge, and now, in its own time, while she sleeps, it takes shape. Two shapes.

About eight weeks from now, while she still sleeps, the cubs will tumble out of her. Ten ounces each and blind, they'll find her nipples and set straight to nursing. While she sleeps, they'll nurse and grow, nurse and grow, their hunger draining her body's stores.

In late March, when the air warms, she'll wake slowly. Imagine the moment when, spent and thin, she finds four bright eyes looking back at her.