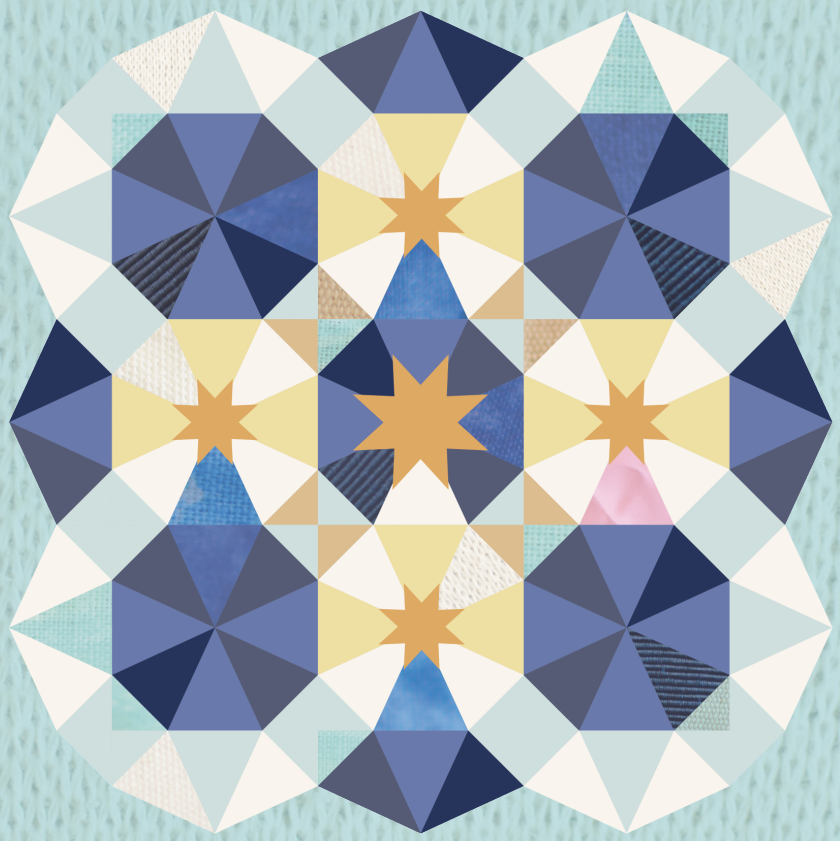
AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

Art, Poetry, & Reflections for Advent

a Sanctified Art

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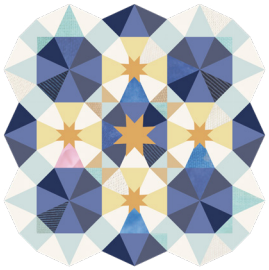
Advent is a season of endings and beginnings. As the calendar year comes to a close, a new church year begins. Christ's birth ushers us into new ways of living and loving; and yet, the world as we know it spins madly on. In many ways, pregnant Mary was surrounded by endings—large and small, personal and political. But Mary proclaimed hope in a God who was and is making all things new. Christ's birth offered a beautiful new beginning for shepherds and Magi alike—all the while, King Herod tried to bring Christ's story to an end. When we ourselves navigate seasons filled with endings and beginnings, we need reminders. We need words that can feel like steady ground, like a path for our feet to find as we step forward into the unknown.

This devotional is shaped around several reminders we all need from time to time: *you are a blessing; we can't go alone; do the good that is yours to do; hope is worth the risk; love knows your name; don't forget to laugh; the road isn't straight*. These reminders root us in the fundamental truths of our faith. Many of them are life lessons we teach to children—lessons that adults continue to learn and relearn. They may resemble the blessings we impart to loved ones during special ceremonies like weddings or baptisms. And so, we invite you to move through this Advent season as if you are entering a sacred new chapter, holding fast to the reminders that will bolster you for the journey ahead.

Read, look, and sing your way through the pages of this devotional. Each week offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you strength, courage, and grace. As you journey through this season, may you find words for belovedness and hope. May you find words for beginning again. For no matter what you are facing, no matter what this new day brings, love is your beginning.

Artfully yours,
The Sanctified Art Creative Team

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed
Hannah Garrity
Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman
Rev. Anna Strickland



ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

REV. LISLE GWYNN GARRITY

Founder | Creative Director of SA

Lisle Gwynn Garrity *(she/her)* is a Pastorist (pastor + artist) and creative entrepreneur seeking to fill the church with more color, paint, mystery, and creativity. Her faith is rooted in creative practices that help her break free from perfectionism and control and participate in creating a more whole, just world.

REV. LAUREN WRIGHT PITTMAN

Director of Branding | Founding Creative Partner of SA

Lauren *(she/her)* is an artist, graphic designer, and theologian. She uses paint, metallic inks, linoleum carving tools, and her trusty Apple pencil to image the layered complexity she experiences in scripture texts. Visual exploration offers her a holy space to ask questions, find her voice, take risks, and make bold statements.

HANNAH GARRITY Founding Creative Partner of SA

Hannah *(she/her)* is the Director of Christian Faith, Life, and Arts at the wonderful Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. She also serves as liturgical artist for the Summer Worship Series at Montreat Conference Center (Montreat, NC). Hannah is currently pursuing a Master's of Divinity and Master's of Christian Education at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA.

REV. SARAH A. SPEED

Founding Creative Partner of SA

Sarah (Are) Speed *(she/her)* is the Head of Staff/Senior Pastor at Second Presbyterian Church of Kansas City, MO. Sarah feels called to welcome people into the church by using her energy and passion for beautifully-scripted words, raw and relevant liturgy, and hands-on worship experiences to engage our longing for God and the need for justice in this messy world.

REV. ANNA STRICKLAND

Creative Partner | Operations Support

Anna Strickland *(she/her)* looks for the Divine in the everyday like treasure in clay jars and first encountered God in the integration of her spiritual self and artistic self. She is a former teacher and college minister, a proud Texas Longhorn and graduate of Iliff School of Theology, a Baptist to the core ministering in ecumenical spaces, and a lover of chaos anchored by the belief that the Spirit is most active in the spaces between us.

ABOUT OUR GUEST CONTRIBUTORS

GUEST WRITER

Kayla Craig

Kayla Craig *(she/her)* is a former journalist who brings deep curiosity and care to her writing. She's the author of two books: *Every Season Sacred: Reflections, Prayers, and Invitations to Nourish Your Soul and Nurture Your Family throughout the Year* and *To Light Their Way: A Collection of Prayers & Liturgies for Parents*. Kayla graduated from Drake University with a B.A. in Magazine Journalism from Drake's well-known School of Journalism & Mass Communication. She minored in Sociology and English, and has been writing professionally for more than 15 years. With a poetic, prophetic voice, she created the popular "Liturgies for Parents" Instagram account, which Christianity Today named an "essential parenting resource." Kayla's nuanced and accessible reflections, essays, and prayers are featured in various books, devotionals, and Bible studies. Kayla lives in a 115-year-old former convent in her Iowa hometown, where she hopes to create spaces of welcome alongside her four children, two dogs, and husband, Jonny. kaylacraig.com | @liturgiesforparents | @kayla_craig

GUEST ARTIST

Rev. Nicolette (Faison) Peñaranda

Rev. Nicolette "Nic" *(she/her)* is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America serving as the Program Director for African Descent Ministries. Nic is the creator of MONadvocacy, a racial justice resource grounded in play, as well as the "Talks at the Desk" series which celebrates the voices of leaders in the ELCA African descent community: livinglutheran.org/2022/02/a-love-letter-to-african-descent-communities.

She is passionate about queer Black liberation, cultivating diverse leadership in faith spaces, and the art of creation. She is also the illustrator of *God's Holy Darkness*, written by Sharei Green and Beckah Selnick (Beaming Books, 2022). The book deconstructs anti-Blackness in Christian theology by celebrating instances in the story of God's people when darkness, blackness, and night are beautiful, good, and holy. She resides in the Chicagoland area with her spouse, two daughters, and two cats, Penne Pablo and Rigatoni Braxton.

"WHEN WILL YOU BE BACK?"

Yesterday I visited an old man in the hospital.
I was not the only one. We talked on the elevator
ride down—
Has he gained any weight? Will he stay in that room?
Does he like the food? Has he called?
All the man wanted to know was, *When will you be back?*

We ask that question in a thousand different ways
every single day,
our hearts leaning over themselves,
bending to get closer to love.
We say, *Text me when you're home.*
Call me when you're free.
One more kiss!
I love you all the time.
When will you be back?
What we really mean is—
I can't go through life alone.
Please don't let me go through life alone.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ruth 1 | Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

As nights grow longer and the world seems to hush under the weight of winter, we often find ourselves cloistered and secluded as we wait for the world to thaw.[2] But the season of Advent whispers an ancient truth: *We were never meant to journey these paths alone.*

In a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, choosing communal life is both radical–and deeply faithful.

We see this in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth, a Moabite woman, could have returned to her birth family after her husband's death, following the expected path. Naomi, overcome with loss and steeped in grief, initially pushes Ruth away. She even renames herself "Mara," meaning "bitter," reflecting her belief that her life has been marked by divine disfavor. Instead of leaving, Ruth chooses a radical commitment to her mother-in-law, saying, "Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go."

Ruth's choice wasn't merely about devotion. It was the formation of a new family built not on blood but on *kinship*, on the daring belief that our lives are better intertwined.

Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves, believing that solitude is safer than the vulnerability of connection.

When the weight of loneliness makes you feel forgotten and you wonder if your place in this world matters, it's easy to get sucked into a cascade of lies.

You start thinking you're the *only one* carrying this weight of loneliness, the *only one* on the outside looking in. And it snowballs into other struggles like inadequacy, insecurity, and insignificance.

Recent studies show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection. This leads Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, to call loneliness an "epidemic." Loneliness not only hurts us on an individual level, but negatively impacts society as a whole. Feelings of isolation hurt our mental *and* physical health. Research has shown that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.[3]

Cultivating compassionate community is the antidote.

"If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being," says Murthy. "And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country."[4]

We're better together, and deep down in her bones, Ruth knew it. Naomi's grief doesn't deter her. Ruth keeps moving toward Naomi, embarking on a journey to a new beginning. As much as Naomi needed Ruth, Ruth needed Naomi—a beautiful picture of mutuality, which is deeply needed in our fractured world.

Ruth and Naomi's journey to Bethlehem, mirroring another future trek to the same town by Mary and Joseph, is a pilgrimage of faith. Both journeys hold discomfort and uncertainty, yet the travelers take it on *together*. This kinship echoes through the lineage of Jesus himself, as Ruth, a woman who embodied the strength of connection over isolation, is named among his ancestors.

We aren't meant to do it alone.

The season of flickering candles and twinkling lights can have a shadow side filled with loneliness and grief. For many, it feels like *anything but* the happiest time of the year. And yet, this season offers ample opportunity for kinship and connection—to reach out to the grieving, to invite the lonely into our homes and hearts, and to show that in God's family, no one has to face their sorrows alone.

What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season—not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing your messy, holy, complicated life?

The wisdom of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "Two are better than one . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other." Though often heard at weddings, this wisdom speaks to the fundamental human need for connection, no matter the relationship or what season of life we're in.

You can't go alone, nor were you meant to.

In each other's companionship, may we find the reflection of the One who, in becoming flesh, chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us that we need each other.

BLESSING

Beloved, you are not alone on this winding journey. May the companionship of fellow sojourners reflect the love of the One who—in becoming flesh—chose to journey alongside us. May the quilt of life warm you from the chill of isolation, and may the Spirit move you to compassion as you cultivate community, even in times of uncertainty.

BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Light in the darkness,*

EXHALE: *Guide our paths together.*

2 If you are reading these words from the southern hemisphere, we hope you will still receive this invitation to resist isolation, regardless of the seasons.

3 "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community," by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. A publication from the U.S. Public Health Service, 2023. hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

4 Ibid.

Turn your booklet 90 degrees to the right to view the art.

Binding Braids | Nicolette Peñaranda

Acrylic, markers, paper, and mixed media collage on canvas

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ruth 1

FROM THE ARTIST | Nicolette Peñaranda

When I was a child, my mother used to give my older sister and I a unibraid down our backs. She was never particularly good at doing our hair. We always had flyaways and little bits of frizz at our edges accompanying our bright big smiles on picture day. It wasn't long until I started braiding my own hair. At the tender age of nine I would spend hours in the bathroom staring at myself in the mirror with two hands to heaven. The more I did my own, the more I noticed others' braids as well. I would learn to appreciate our shared kinship. Our braids were our ancestors, our heritage, and our culture. Our designs were our creativity and our individuality. Braids bind us in ways that go beyond the physical—we are forever entwined.

Ruth and Naomi find themselves bound by their widowhood and familial grief. And while Orpah made the choice to return to her village, Ruth bound herself to her mother-in-law: "Where you go, I will go." They too have spiritual connections that are deeper than the surface. To the left, Naomi is embodied by purples, yellows, and greens. While purple is most commonly associated with royalty, here it's meant to hold her grief. The deep color reflects her processing the loss of both of her sons and husband while the contrast of the yellows and gold represent the glimmers of hope she finds in companionship with Ruth. Her chest holds a subtle landscape detailing her and Ruth holding hands while journeying back to Naomi's native land. The image is soft like the clouds surrounding her, as if her story is suddenly easier now that Ruth is with her.

To the right, Ruth is filled with blues, oranges, and greens. Whereas Naomi's portrait holds grief and duality, Ruth's color palette is meant to feel more hopeful and vibrant. There is something pure about her as reflected in the pearls around her neck. In the middle of the canvas, Ruth and Naomi's braids are woven into each other. The two of them are also portrayed on opposing sides of the braids, seeking each other while also latching onto their bond. Ruth and Naomi are also the two hands pressed upon each other like a prayer. It feels like two worlds are colliding with the rounded waves and galactic triangles surrounding them. Above the hands is an omnipresent moon, as if God is looking over their bond.

This piece conveys several different forms of connection over a blanket of decorative textiles quilted together. It is meant to invite the audience into an otherworldly, fluid space for biblical wonderment.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

From the Three | Hannah Garrity
Acrylic painting with mixed media on canvas

WE CAN'T GO ALONE

READ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

At the end of this Ecclesiastes text, we read that the threefold cord is not easily broken. I had a piece of twine, which when I pulled it apart, broke into four sections. I sistered two into one, making three. I filmed myself pulling apart and re-weaving the twine. Then I drew this quilt square design from the still images in my video.

I dislike the final energy in the central motif of this artwork. It feels discordant. Perhaps that's the point. When I read this scripture, it seems to focus on strength—but in the rope itself, I find weakness. It was so easy to unravel the cord and create weakness. Its strength lies in the weave, in the interwoven fibers coming together. Without that interweaving, the fibers are weak.

As I continue to watch our communities come together and splinter apart, it is always through the aspirational and the altruistic that the re-weaving begins. This discordant quilt square calls us to sit in the tension of the in-between, to weave our lives together rather than pulling them apart. And yet, I hate it, the asymmetry of it all. I want the art, the community, and the collective life to be simple, symmetrical, and full of order. But in Ecclesiastes, our practical God emphasizes that two are better than one and three are stronger than two. A three-ply cord isn't easily broken. This offers a very trinitarian way forward in the messy, interwoven, beautiful, and powerful collective.

PRAY

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at **sanctifiedart.org.**

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@sanctifiedart | sanctifiedart.org | contact@sanctifiedart.org