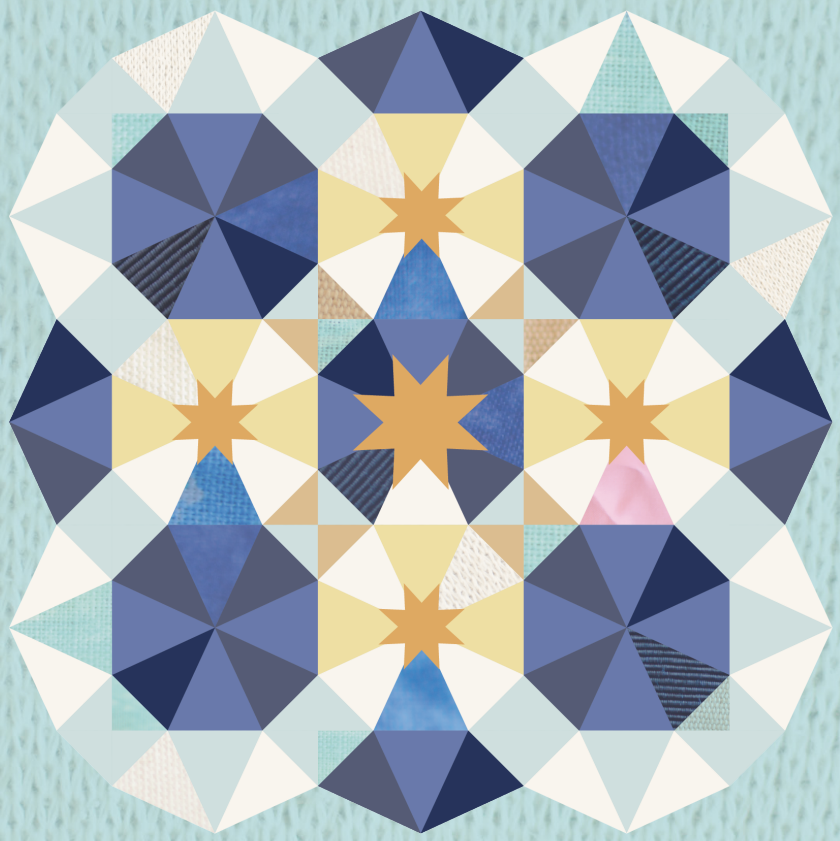
AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

Art, Poetry, & Reflections for Advent

a Sanctified Art

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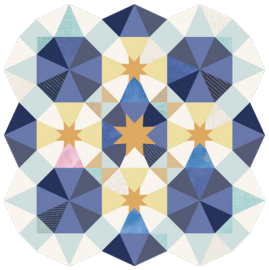
Advent is a season of endings and beginnings. As the calendar year comes to a close, a new church year begins. Christ's birth ushers us into new ways of living and loving; and yet, the world as we know it spins madly on. In many ways, pregnant Mary was surrounded by endings—large and small, personal 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.

FIELD NOTES

With tears in your eyes,
you name all the bumps
and zigzags your life has taken.
With clenched teeth
and a hummingbird pulse,
you wake up
and wonder—how did I get here?
In the last 40 days of
desert wandering, you say
you haven't heard God's voice once.
You say you miss when God was close,
when God used to sing the harmony line.
So you yell at the sky,
begging God to drop a pin,
to name the road,
to draw you a map.
You lament the way this life isn't easy.
You ask me—was the road ever straight and narrow,
or was that all a lie?
But then you crest the mountain,
and I don't hear from you for a while,
because God was growing
in the lilac field
on the other side of the hill.
God was scattered
among the pebbles
of the road you never planned to take.
Isn't it amazing, you say,
there are a million roads home
and God walks every single one of them.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Epiphany | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

THE ROAD ISN'T STRAIGHT

READ Matthew 2:1-12 | Isaiah 43:16-21

REFLECTION | Kayla Craig

As we embrace another new year, we often look at what *was* so that we can more surely enter into what *will be*. Our paths are rarely linear, woven with threads that twist and turn unexpectedly.

The timeless tale of the Magi from Matthew 2:1-12 paints a vivid picture of this truth. These wise travelers from the East didn't follow a straightforward path to find Jesus.

Guided by dreams and stars, their journey was filled with royal encounters and unforeseen detours.

Their experience teaches us a comforting lesson about our winding paths: *feeling uncertain or lost is okay*. We don't need to have everything figured out.

Sometimes, the most profound moments in life come from taking a courageous turn that leads us away from our meticulously-planned routes.

King Herod, steeped in ulterior motives, directed the Magi to report back where the Christ child was. But after being divinely warned in a dream, the Magi chose not to return to Herod, opting to leave “by another road.”

Their decision to embrace alternative paths challenges us as we think about our own journeys. The Magi were willing to have their assumptions challenged and plans changed. The same is true for us: We don’t have to have all the answers or an obstacle-free path because hope is what empowers our journey.

Often, the straight and narrow ways we *assume* are set before us are not our only options.

As we go forth in faith, we’ll have opportunities to decide between conforming to external expectations and following God's path. Following the Spirit’s stirrings may lead us down twists and turns that lead us out of our comfort zones but fit us into a divine path of truth, justice, and peace.

We don’t have to know where we’re going to know that God is with us.

Isaiah 43:16-21 testifies to this truth with a powerful promise: *God makes a way* in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. This prophetic assurance paints a vivid picture of God’s active presence in our lives: creating paths where none seem to exist and inviting us to embrace the new things God is doing. It’s a divine invitation to move forward, learn from the past, and step into new possibilities.

We are never alone in our journey.

Like the Magi, we are often called to take unexpected paths and find new ways. Every journey carries risks and revelations, but God actively carves paths in the wilderness, guiding us through uncharted territories with the promise of making all things new.

Each movement forward in faith brings us closer to where we truly belong. This perspective empowers us to face the uncertainties of our journey with courage, knowing God is with us in the detours.

In this new year, may you find comfort knowing that, like the Magi, a light will guide you home. Rest in the hope that you never truly go alone—the love that knows your name goes alongside you and before you. Let this assurance fill you with peace and courage, open to the new and unexpected paths that God may reveal in the days to come.

BLESSING

It's okay if your journey hasn't looked like you thought it would. As you navigate twists and turns, stay curious and open to where God might be leading. May you find the courage to explore new routes and the wisdom to follow the One who will never leave or forsake you. May each new path be a chance to trust God and discover deeper truths about the love that will never let you go.

BREATH PRAYER

INHALE: *Each twist and turn*

EXHALE: *Invites me to follow you.*

Star of Bethlehem | Hannah Garrity
Acrylic painting with mixed media on canvas

Epiphany | WORDS FOR THE BEGINNING

THE ROAD ISN'T STRAIGHT

READ Matthew 2:1-12

FROM THE ARTIST | Hannah Garrity

They come from afar. I imagine the Magi as queens of wisdom, wealth, and power, bringing their entourage, a vast number of people, to care for them. They protect the Magi on their journey over the dunes and around the twists and turns, ensuring they arrive safely.

They come to pay homage to the baby, the holy child. In this *Words for the Beginning* series, I began each painting with a circular energy. There is a central focus to each design. Each painting has an original quilt square pattern which repeats as the border. The center design is a different iteration of the same idea. For this design, the main motif is the star of Bethlehem. The Bible pages of Matthew 2 are torn apart and glued as a texture within the star points, representing our need to constantly break down fear in service to the God who calls us into a fearless life of love. The star pattern is overlaid in chalk and soft pastel, reiterating the power of God as our guide—who, in this text, is showing the way home by another road.

In our own lives and communities, each of us is vulnerable to political corruption. How are we responding? Whom do we follow as our guide? God calls the Magi home by another road, and their choice to heed the call opens space for Jesus' ministry within the community, which will demonstrate the power of steadfast love. Shortly thereafter, God calls Mary and Joseph to journey to another land, to protect the Messiah until they are safe to return home. What parallels do we see in our own systems, and in our own lives?

In this text, the Magi are dreaming my dreams. The imperial power threatens to kill the long-awaited Messiah. These kinds of threats exist in our own lives too. The Magi seek another way home. I dream of the winding road that is God's call. The road isn't straight. Can you see your next bend?

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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