

Are You Still Watching?

**Using Pop Culture to Tune In,
Find God, and Get Renewed
for Another Season**

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Find God, and Get Renewed
for Another Season

Stephanie Kendell and
Arthur Stewart

Co-Hosts of the Two On One Project



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We celebrate this book by saying...

“Happy Day, Alex and Davis!”

(Schitt’s Creek S3:E13)

That is to say we are so grateful for everything and everyone that made this book possible: for all the days of celebration and the hard days we overcame, the days we unplugged to rest and the days we binged inspired stories, the days we learned to let go and the days that renewed us unexpectedly. We want to thank the people that continue to remind us that God is always present—we just have to tune in. Thank you to the streaming networks and media platforms that kept us engaged and connected when forced to be apart.

And finally, this book is dedicated to the people who renew us—our families, friends, Deuces, communities, and our expansive networks of support. You make the best days possible and our worst days bearable. Thank you for all the ways you tune in and keep watching our shared stories.

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Introduction

Are You Still Watching?

*So, I say to you, ask, and it will be given you;
Search, and you will find;
Quarantine and eventually you will start a podcast.*

In March 2020, when the world collectively shut down due to the global pandemic of the novel Coronavirus, many people of faith found themselves challenged with the new task of building meaningful and sustainable connections in a solely and suddenly digital world. Worship leaders rearranged their homes to stage makeshift pulpits and learned to use the small light of a camera as the fulcrum of connection with their congregants. Members of congregations were tasked with being the church while simultaneously being told to stay away from the church building. We were all challenged to look for God at work in new ways, all at home. This socially encapsulated existence became mundane quickly, and just as quickly, many of us turned to television, movies, books, music, and yes—even podcasts—to help us escape back into the world and the people we so desperately missed. And it did not take long before we were all asked, “Are you still watching?”

The first time you encounter an “Are You Still Watching?” it feels judgmental. We wanted to yell back, “Of course we are still watching! We can’t go outside, and we need to know if Carol Baskin did it!” Days turned into months, episodes into seasons and spinoffs, and it was not long before we didn’t even have to read the screen to know the question and unconsciously push the button on our pre-selected answer, “Keep watching.”

And yet, an unexpected thing started to happen as we collectively binge-watched established and new shows alike. New glimmers of joy started to emerge from our collective streaming as old friends reconnected to talk about new shows, and we all started asking the question, “What’s next?”

Over the months, the perfunctory question of, “Are You Still Watching?” moved from a judgmental question into a curious one—seemingly posed by a divine movement among us. “Are You Still Watching?” became a profound theological statement inviting us into deeper and more nuanced questions: Are you still paying attention to the world around you? Are you still connecting with the people you love? Are you still seeing the new things God is doing? These questions were placed against the backdrop of the solely digital church most of us were navigating at the time and the sense that momentum waned the longer we continued to be apart. Faith leaders, exhausted yet hopeful for something to renew their body and spirit, found that they, too, were asking their congregations the question that seemed to connect us all, “Are You Still Watching?” and then waiting to see if they would choose to keep going.

It was during that time that we, The Reverend Arthur Stewart and The Reverend Stephanie Kendell, also reconnected. We were peripheral friends—fond of one another, usually good for a birthday post on social media, and friendly, to be sure. One day, Arthur was doing a live feed on social media, and Stephanie (also known by the nickname “Spiff” to many) entered the chat. We talked for hours about what we were watching, TV

characters we loved, movies we hated, and music we couldn't live without. We followed up the next week on another live show and talked about Stephen Sondheim's ninetieth birthday and our shared love of Sondheim's work and life. By the end of our time together, we had debated, laughed, and come to two very important conclusions: God was at work in pop culture, and our conversation had been fun!

The unexpected joy of our conversation brought a sense of renewal and energy for the wider work we are both called to do. That renewal, which for us often felt like new energy for old tasks and sustained excitement for those yet to be, quickly became a shared resource for our colleagues, especially those who struggled with finding new sources of inspiration. As faith leaders, we use the word renewal in the church often, but rarely do we explore the nuanced ways renewal looks for each of us. Who knew ours would come in the form of looking for God in the media we know and love, and then having a conversation about it with friends and colleagues around the world?

From those conversations, and with the encouragement and support of friends, family, and colleagues, the *Two On One Project* was born. Each week, the two of us have a dynamic, theological, and often spoiler-filled conversation with a guest about *one* aspect of pop culture. Now in our third season, we have interviewed some of the most notable and inspiring faith leaders working for the church today. We and our Deuces (*Two On One Project* listeners) have experienced renewal through unexpected joy, beloved community, vulnerable connection, and a shared belief that *Love Actually* is an awful movie.

The necessity of our new digital reality in the church highlighted just how important community is to our faith, our mental health, and our ability to care for each other. The Bethany Fellows, a ministry organization that serves congregations by assisting newly ordained pastors' transition from seminary to sustained congregational ministry, knew that since the church

was changing, so would the way Bethany Fellows helped congregations. While none of us have pastored through a global pandemic before, the Bethany Fellows worked to answer the question we were all too afraid to ask, “Will we be renewed?”

Luckily, both of us are Bethany Fellows and have been the recipients of their incredible support. *Two On One Project* would not be here without Bethany Fellows, as we—not just Stephanie and Arthur, but all our contributing authors—are either past or present Fellows and had access to the tools and networks of support created by Bethany Fellows to navigate this unknown time. This book is brought to you in partnership with The Bethany Fellows and Chalice Press. The Bethany Fellows’ commitment to congregational care is part of why this book is meant to be a resource for congregations and their leaders for tuning in, finding God, and getting renewed for another season of life and ministry.

On *Two On One Project*, we end each episode by asking our guests, “What biblical character, book, verse, or theme are you most reminded of in our pop culture topic?” Our question is an invitation to our guests each week and to you, dear readers, to tune in and find God in new places, like a dart game in a small English pub or the harmonies of a Broadway musical. We hope this new connection with God will offer you some much-needed rest and renewal from the challenging work of being human in a very human world. The divine spark is everywhere if we seek it. Yes, even in hip-hop and country music, even in streaming television shows and blockbuster movies. Our faith is a story—we hear the stories, we learn the stories, we tell the stories—and believe us, God is in every one of these stories.

So, we hope that the stories you read here, stories of how God speaks through pop culture, will inspire you to try a French tuck and seek the Divine in places you may have overlooked. We hope you will come to know that there is a difference between just listening and fully experiencing the Holy Spirit in Beyoncé and

to realize that it is okay if the Avett Brothers is your hymnal. Finally, we hope you feel connected to a group of people who also feel that some days a well-placed “Ew, David” sounds an awful lot like an “Amen.”

In short, we hope this book helps you and your congregation to always hit “Keep Watching” when God asks, “Are You Still Watching?” (Because we all know this connection is the only way we will get renewed for Season 2 and beyond).

Two On One Project is a spoilers show, and this book is no exception. This book—which, again, *contains spoilers* to the media it engages—has been structured to facilitate a year-long study, using one chapter each month. It can be transposed into a weekly series, too—you bought the book (thank you!), so please use it as you need. In the table of contents and title of each essay, you will find the cultural touchstones our authors used in conversation with biblical texts and themes. You may want to engage these touchstones before you read the chapter. Once you have read the chapter, we offer reflective questions meant to help you think expansively about the topic and themes therein. This book does have an intentional design moving you through the calendar with each chapter, though each chapter can also stand alone. However, if you were to start at the beginning of the calendar year, being mindful of the liturgical calendar as well, you’ll see our intentions.

Daniel Lyvers begins our year at the Epiphany, in *Follow a Gleaming Star*, talking about the magi, the Avett Brothers, and what it means to be open to what comes next. As the days get longer, **Colton Lott** writes about how *We Need Some Light*, asking faithful questions about discipleship, mental health, and family. For the season of Lent, **Stephanie Kendell** examines the hermeneutic of curiosity and how we might seek a deeper Jesus in *Barbecue Sauce*. **Rae Karim** offers a Holy Week meditation on vengeance, remembering, and forgetting in *Forget What’s Behind*. In Eastertide, **Travis Smith-McKee** holds both what

was and what might be in *Lord, Only You Can Answer That*. As we enter ordinary time, which is anything but ordinary, we engage the holy day of Juneteenth and the strength of one's identity with **Larry Morris III's** *The Sun Has Gazed On Me*. We continue the season with **Arthur Stewart** as he writes about the kingdom of God and community in *The Town In Which I Currently Am*, and as we move into the next season of life, **Jason Reynolds** asks, *Do Our Choices Really Matter?* and holds in tension the gift of free will within the structure of predestination. As we continue toward the last third of the essays and possibly even the year, **Diane Faires Beadle** considers what happens if the church really means *everybody* when we say all are welcome in *One Body, Many Members*. For World Communion Sunday, **Delesslyn Kennebrew** asks, *Where is Fat Jesus?* at our tables and how self-love leads to a deeper connection to Christ. We close out the Christian year and this book with themes of the known and unknown with **Shane Isner's** *Go to Hell, Christian!*, and finally, we look to a hectic and beautiful season of Advent with **Whitney Waller's** *Chaos as Virtue*.

Again, dear readers, dear Deuces, and dear new friends, we know that these last few years have been both a gift and a challenge (and let's be honest, the latter is much more easily identifiable), but through the *Two On One Project* and the essays you are about to engage with, we hope that you too will be inspired to tune in, find God, and get renewed for another season of life, ministry, and community. These last few years have given us more questions than answers, but what we do know is this: God is still watching, and we hope you are too.

“You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.

—Wayne Gretzky'

—Michael Scott.”¹

—*Two On One Project* Arthur and Stephanie



Chapter One

Following a Gleaming Star: Epiphany, Magi, and the Avett Brothers

The Reverend Daniel Lyvers

The band The Avett Brothers has a three-part series of albums called “The Gleam.” The original *The Gleam* was released in 2006, *The Second Gleam* in 2008, and the most recent, *The Third Gleam*, came out in August 2020. A lot of life happens in fourteen years, and still there are themes that weave this series, and arguably the full musical catalog of The Avett Brothers, together. Seth Avett, the younger Avett brother and the one that usually plays the guitar, describes *The Third Gleam* as:

...the sound of my brother and I in a room, singing about what is on our minds and in our hearts at the time... sharing it now is about what sharing art is always about: another chance that we may partake in connecting with our brothers and sisters of this world, and hopefully

joining you in noticing a speck of light gleaming in what appears to be a relatively long and dark night.²

The Avett Brothers are a band from Concord, North Carolina. There are two brothers, Scott and Seth Avett; and a bassist, Bob Crawford, that joined them in the very early days. Bob booked their first tour and nudged them to take their music to the world. Then, fan favorite cellist Joe Kwon began playing with them in 2007 and has made himself indispensable ever since.³

Their musical genre is tricky to define. There's a banjo, a guitar, a bass, and then...a cello, keyboards, drums, an occasional organ, and those sweet vocal harmonies. The guitar is sometimes electric, while the vocals are country and twangy in one song and punk rock-ish in the next.

Some may call The Avett Brothers' music folk, some rock, others a mashup known as folk-rock. Others have tried the labels Americana, bluegrass, or country. However you define the genre in musical terms, The Avett Brothers have played together for over twenty years, so their sound reflects the passage of time and the growth of a band constantly discovering its music together.

For me, I describe their music as authentic, tender, vulnerable, and human. Ultimately, The Avett Brothers have written and performed music that speaks to the messy, bizarre, wonderfully holy, and complex experience of being human. They present songs of process, of journeys of trial and error, and of experiencing deep love and real heartbreak. There's a rhythm of faithfulness and openness, and of going one direction and then having to change direction. There's wisdom, folly, and vanity. To listen to the Avetts is to be let into the deepest parts of their journey, a search for meaning and purpose in a world of uncertainty.

The Avett Brothers offer music for when it's "sometimes hard to see love in anything," and it encourages listeners to "step back

into the light”⁴ and look toward that gleaming speck begging us to notice it.

Themes in their music include openness, following a light to an uncertain path, and going one direction and changing somewhere along the way. Kind of magi-like, right?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The Story of the Magi ranks right up there with the Christmas and Easter stories in terms of snaring the human imagination.”⁵ I’d guess many of us church folks are familiar with the story of Epiphany and the magi. There are songs about three kings traversing afar. Nativity sets are often adorned with “wise men” carrying gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then there’s that star.

As often is the case, the more a story is told, the more it takes on details that are not actually there. Matthew’s gospel never says the “wise men” are kings, nor does Matthew specify three of them. As Amy-Jill Levine argues, “given Matthew’s view of kings, to call the magi ‘kings’ would be odd. Nor would any early reader of Matthew’s Gospel see the magi as kings.”⁶ The thought that there were three of them comes from the reference to the three gifts they bring. Levine writes, “There may have been seven Magi, or ten, or more,”⁷ and likely, they probably were not all men.

The importance of the magi is their presence, a tone-setting moment in the beginning of Matthew’s gospel that tells the reader of the expansiveness of the good news that will unfold in the story. Additionally, the significance of the magi is in their actions, both in following a star and in denying Herod’s orders by not returning to him and instead going home “by another road” (Mt. 2:12).

And what about that star? According to Matthew, the star was the guide that led the magi to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph (Mt. 2:9). There have been many articles attempting to explain the star of

Bethlehem scientifically. Perhaps it was a planetary conjunction, like in December 2020, when Jupiter and Saturn appeared closer together than they had in centuries, thus showing up as a mesmerizing dot of bright light in the sky.⁸

Yet these attempts to explain the star miss the point. As Amy-Jill Levine puts it, “The star of Bethlehem is not about science, it is about the search for meaning.”⁹

These stories that make up our faith tradition should be stories that open our imagination. They are stories that don’t need to be easily explained or passed off as science or history lessons. Like a star that dots the night sky, these stories should catch our attention and make us wonder: *What is God up to?*

That is what epiphany moments do, after all: catch our attention, stop us in our tracks, and nudge us to enter the rhythm of movement that is God’s creative flow. The story of the magi is an invitation to its readers to foster wonder and an attentiveness to the surprising, holy ways God disrupts us.

I wonder about the star that the magi saw. Was it a blinding light, or was it just reflective enough to make them notice, a gleam that made them stop and say, “Maybe I ought to explore that a little further”?

From the beginning of Matthew’s gospel are clues for the reader about what entering this unfolding story will entail. It is a story of openness, journey, courage, risk, transformation, and a search for meaning.

These are the same themes that so consistently define the music of The Avett Brothers.

The first time I was introduced to their music was the summer after my first year of college. Fittingly, I was on the road, driving back from a week of counseling camp, when my friend said, “Here’s a band you might like.” He played me two songs.

The first was “Laundry Room,” a song about being young and in love, with lyrics about wishing on shooting stars and the nostalgia that accompanies being human. We are “breathing time machines,” after all.¹⁰

The other song was “Murder in the City,” which contains my favorite lyric they’ve ever written: “Always remember there is nothing worth sharing like the love that lets us share our name.”¹¹ Having originally written it to speak of the love between family, Scott Avett, the older Avett brother on the banjo, now says that each time he sings those words, he thinks of our collective, shared name: human.¹²

After hearing those songs in the car that day, I went home and immediately downloaded every album they had available. What followed has felt like my own journey of self-discovery shared alongside theirs, which feels appropriate since faith is often explored in community. Their music gives voice to emotions I can’t adequately express for myself; their lyrics help me feel deeply and prompt epiphanies of my own.

The Avett Brothers’ music is raw and tender, rooted in themes of human experience, such as the search for meaning, discernment of what it means to live and be alive in this world, and remembering that the journey of life and faith is a shared one. In their song “The Once and Future Carpenter,” they sing, “Now I spend my days in search of a woman we call purpose, and if I ever pass back through her town I’ll stay,” before returning to a chorus that says:

Forever I will move like the world
that turns beneath me
And when I lose my direction, I’ll look up to the sky
And when the black dress drags upon the ground
I’ll be ready to surrender, and remember
We’re all in this together
If I live the life I’m given, I won’t be scared to die.¹³

These are lyrics that speak to the reality of life. We move, we get lost, we look for something that gives us direction, and ultimately, we live into all of it, knowing we're not alone and that who we are is more than enough to give us courage for the way.

The Avett Brothers are not unfamiliar with the Herods among us, and their music doesn't avoid that confrontation. I can imagine the magi singing along to the words of "Salvation Song." As the banjo strums in their heads and they go home by another way, I imagine them humming:

We came for salvation
We came for family
We came for all that's good that's how we'll
walk away
We came to break the bad
We came to cheer the sad
We came to leave behind the world a better way
...and if it compromises truth than we will go.¹⁴

These words so simply capture much of the journey of faithfulness, yet to live in such a way is not always so simple. To come for salvation, good, and joy puts us right in the face of injustice, evil, and grief. That is where the star leads, though—where love takes on flesh and salvation takes root: in the midst of the heartbreak and hurt. We hear the invitation to come while knowing that, at points, we will be asked to compromise those holy truths and turn around.

The Avett Brothers' music is written through living it. They attest to that in reflecting on their song "No Hard Feelings" as a song that is particularly vulnerable because it took the most living to write.¹⁵ It's music that roots us in an embodied faith. To know the gospel stories, to know love and hope, we have to live it. Not perfectly, yet actively. I find comfort as the Avetts sing, "regret for every step I took from Fisher Road to Hollywood. Feeling bad and acting good, never was content...but still I

had to go.”¹⁶ It’s a song of journey filled with wrong turns and moments of discernment. So often, epiphany experiences make very little sense, and yet still we have to go.

There’s wisdom in the music of The Avett Brothers. One might even call them...wise men. However, as with the magi in Matthew, wisdom does not equal perfection. Wisdom is noticing, going, not compromising truth, changing direction when you need to, and taking the risk to follow the star, even if the end destination is uncertain.

From The Avett Brothers and the magi, we learn that faithfulness is a movement, a story that is experienced; and regardless of the roundabout way it takes us to get there, it somehow leads to the surprising presence of love in flesh.

Music, art, and the literary masterpieces that are the gospels connect us with the holy in incredible ways. At this moment, I hear this invitation: follow the *gleaming* star. Epiphanies are not often earth-shattering revelations but specks of light that spark curiosity. Epiphanies invite us to lean into wonder and imagination. Yes, it is dangerous and risky and undoubtedly leads to getting lost and starting over. But at this point on the way, perhaps we can find an additional compass from the music of The Avett Brothers:

Yes, we live uncertainty
And disappointments have to be
And every day we might be facing more
And yes, we live in desperate times
But fading words and shaking rhymes
There’s only one thing here worth hoping for
With Lucifer beneath you and God above
If either one of them asks you what your living of
Say love...¹⁷

Reflection Questions:

- What are your “gleam moments”—experiences that caught your attention and changed your direction?
- Who are the musicians, poets, or artists that help give voice to human experience for you and connect you to the sacred?
- What are your North Stars, the compasses that you use to guide you along the way?
- Pick a song from the Avett Epiphany playlist and listen to it. What lyrics, themes, or thoughts stand out, and how do they speak to your understanding of faith?
- What do the magi represent for you, and who are your “modern-day magi?”

The Avett Brothers’ Epiphany Playlist:

- Back Into the Light—Album: *The Third Gleam*
- Laundry Room—Album: *I and Love and You*
- Murder in the City—Album: *The Second Gleam*
- The Once and Future Carpenter—Album: *The Carpenter*
- Salvation Song—Album: *Mignonette*
- No Hard Feelings—Album: *True Sadness*
- Fisher Road to Hollywood—Album: *True Sadness*
- Living of Love—Album: *Emotionalism*
- Head Full of Doubt/Road Full of Promise—Album: *I and Love and You*
- Backwards with Time—Album: *The Gleam*