

LOW

AN HONEST ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



JOHN PAVLOVITZ

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Introduction

We naturally read the Bible retrospectively. We encounter our faith tradition in the rearview mirror of history, and as a result we approach it knowing how the story ends. This often leads us to sanitize the gospels—to obscure the gritty, messy reality of those moments as they were experienced in real time. We tend to over-spiritualize the events being described, and we view the God-narrative as if from 30 thousand feet, safe in the abstract places of detached theology. Scripture is a movie we are passively watching rather than a story we are participating in, and so we often miss the gravity of moments, failing to experience them on a visceral level.

But there is a beauty in trying to see these accounts from the ground level, to imagine how they looked and felt from the low places of people's ordinary lives. When we do this, we remember what is really going on here. We remember that this is the story of an olive-skinned baby, born amid the smell of damp straw and animal dung because no human-worthy welcome could be found; of a child of young Palestinian Jewish parents, desperately fleeing politically ordered genocide. It is the story of a poor, itinerant, street preaching rabbi spending his days dining with the lepers and prostitutes, enlisting

the doubters and the backsliders, and comforting the bleeding and the grieving. It is divinity coming low to inhabit humanity.

When we place our feet firmly in the dirt and dust of the everyday within the gospel stories, we see Jesus getting low to meet us there. The spiritual journey is spent largely in the low and shadow places. We are there in that beautiful lowness when we live humbly. We are there when we seek forgiveness. We are there in our grief and suffering. We are there when we kneel in reverent awe. We are there when we spend ourselves on behalf of someone else. When we place ourselves in these postures, our perspective changes, our attitude toward people shifts, and we become agents of love in a way that actually resembles Jesus. We perpetuate his character through our very lives.

When Jesus offers the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” he reminds us that as we walk the road of Advent the invitation is not to escape this place to an elevated heavenly sanctuary somewhere; it is to bring heaven down. Immanuel means “God with us.” In other words, it is Jesus getting low. This is really good news for us here on the ground.

Let’s head to the low places together.

A Messy Nativity

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

—LUKE 2:6–7

I still remember witnessing my wife giving birth to our first child, Noah. The wait of the previous nine months had seemed agonizingly slow, but during those final moments in the hospital, everything accelerated to a velocity approaching light speed. After warnings that his arrival was imminent, I'd been quickly ushered into a closet-sized space adjacent to the delivery room and instructed to don a white outfit that seemed part HAZMAT suit, part late-Elvis stage jumpsuit sans the bedazzling. Just as I was finishing fastening myself in, I was led to my wife's side, where I essentially became a passionate, well-meaning—though incidental—spectator. Up until that point, I thought I'd prepared myself. I'd attended all the classes along with her, had countless lengthy conversations about what to expect, and read all the requisite books to feel properly equipped for what I was about witness. I had no idea.

The sounds and scents and sights were the kind of disorienting sensory overload that transcends words. I stayed upright—but barely.

We tend to sanitize the birth story of Jesus, fashioning it into a pristine, shimmering nativity scene adorned with gold accents and residing comfortably on a hallway table or atop a fireplace mantle. It all becomes so benign and serene that we forget the visceral reality of the moment, that it was as loud and chaotic and messy as childbirth is. Jesus was pushed through Mary's birth canal and into a strange world. To miss this fact is to cheapen the event by trying to soften it into something neat and orderly, when in truth (as with all births) there was surely mess and chaos in the moment.

We do this with our spiritual journeys too, wanting them to be comfortable and clean, desiring something attractive that we can easily accessorize our lives with—but that isn't reality, is it? Life comes with the collateral damage of living, with failed plans and relational collapse, with internal struggle and existential crises, and we carry these things with us into this season. The good news is we don't need to discard our messiness to step into this season, and we couldn't even if we wanted to. Bring every bit of your flawed self and all your chaotic circumstances to this day. Welcome the mess.

Faith in the Intersection

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.

—MATTHEW 4:18–20

I lived on the planet for 26 years before I met my wife. My road twisted and pinballed for a quarter of a century with me not knowing she even existed—until one day, there we were sharing the same space and time in a college classroom in Philadelphia. Our long and very separate journeys suddenly overlapped, and we didn't know it at first, but everything in our lives would be different. All of our relationships can be understood as intersections: the places our road meets that of another person and both stories are rewritten, sometimes wonderfully and sometimes less so. Each of us is a product of these many crossings.

I always liked the idea of reading the gospel stories and looking for the intersections—the times Jesus' life crossed the path of another person—and how each person was irrevocably changed by the occasion. A man driven to madness and isolation finds rest in his own head. A shunned leper receives an unprecedented embrace. A woman caught in adultery is surprised by extraordinary mercy. A despised tax collector is invited into revolutionary ministry. A man four days dead is raised to life again. A young, terrified woman is asked to bear a planet-rocking baby. Over and over, when someone meets Jesus, transformation and restoration are waiting; there is something wondrous to be witnessed. The very birth narrative of Jesus is the image of the most profound of intersections: God and earth meeting, and the latter being completely altered.

Today, dwell on the people who've crossed your circuitous path and changed your story. Remember some of those initial meetings and the ground you've covered since. Sit with gratitude for them and for the difference they've made on your journey. And reflect on the way you've been changed by an encounter with God—or what seemed like God to you in that moment. Think about the love and the faith you've found in the intersections.

This Is Not a Test

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

*“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter things hidden since the creation of
the world.”*

—MATTHEW 13:33–35

At one point in my spiritual journey, I reached a place where every infinitesimal decision seemed like a specific moral test, a perpetual pass-fail pop quiz from God that I needed to get precisely right—or else. (The “or else” usually involved heat, humidity, and endless teeth gnashing.) I continually agonized over trying to hear what God was telling me in the most benign of moments (since so many other Christians I knew

seemed so adept at it, from what they told me). In this heavily pressurized headspace, God's will became a singular, microscopic needle in a planet-sized haystack that I was required to find over and over again, or risk punishment. It was exhausting and frustrating, and it tended to make me miserable. As I started to read the gospels more closely, I discovered something new there: *mystery*. Instead of hard-and-fast rules, I found curious word pictures about yeast inside dough, seeds scattered into soil, branches connected to vines, and treasures buried underground. I found nebulous calls to meekness and heart purity and peacemaking. As I embraced that wonder, I felt freer in the expansive space of daily life.

Jesus didn't need to *live* here. He could have shown up, tossed out another stone slab or a rolled parchment filled with black-and-white religious do's and don'ts, and then disappeared into the ether—leaving a neat and tidy, easily navigable religion to delineate our every decision. Instead, he chose to live life alongside flawed human beings, in messy and meandering trips into wheatfields and lepers' homes and leaky boats.

There is a great deal of gray (or color) in this low-to-the-ground spiritual journey. The birth (and the life) of Jesus remind us that our daily existence is not a precise theological test, and the goal is not to avoid failing. It is an ever-unfolding trip through a day we've never been to, where we notice beauty, move with compassion, have grace revealed, and within a wide and expansive space—we get to choose.

Too Good to Be True?

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

—Luke 2:10

I tend to be skeptical of late-night infomercials. I know they're trying to sell me something, and it makes the lofty claims their enthusiastic (and somehow always Australian) spokespeople deliver pretty tough to swallow. They usually promise far more in matters of internal transformation and emotional well-being than a simple toaster oven or garden hose should be able to deliver—and most of the time I see right through them, because I know that I'll be disappointed if I fall for it. Of course, there are those occasions when the sales pitch is perfectly presented and hits me at just the right time (usually when I'm hungry or bored or open to suggestion) and I make a purchase. Four to six weeks later when the product arrives, I'm usually disappointed.

Good news. Great Joy. All people. Those are the unbelievable claims of the angels to the shepherds about what one coming child will bring with him. It sounds

like a pretty lofty list of features for one nondescript baby born in a feeding trough to make good on—and the shepherds would have been justified in making a hard pass. Perhaps the fact that they too witnessed this spectacular sales pitch at night explains their immediate enthusiasm. Whatever the reason, the shepherds were all in and soon became passionate pitchmen themselves.

Two thousand years after this first angelic infomercial, we who seek to perpetuate Jesus here have to wrestle with the reality that the people of Jesus have not always been good news or great joy to all people. We have to decide if those failures are overpromises or just user error. Is our faith tradition able to be all we hope it will be? Can we deliver on the promises made by the angels? Can we supply the world with something that—surprisingly—isn't too good to be true?

So many people in vulnerable communities are rightly skeptical that such beauty exists in this story because of the ugliness Christians have shown them, and because of the injustices and cruelties they experience. Today, look for direct, tangible, and close ways to bring news that is good, and joy that is great, to all people in your path.

Fleeing to Egypt

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

—MATTHEW 2:13–15

I walked around today and I looked at people: those passing me in the grocery store, driving beside me on the highway, filling my newsfeed, walking by the house. I tried to really *see* them, to look beneath the surface veneer they wore, to imagine the invisible burdens they might be carrying below the surface: sick children, relational collapse, financial tension, crippling depression, profound grief, crisis of faith, loss of purpose—or maybe just their own customized multitude of nagging insecurities and fears they’ve been

carrying around since grade school and have never been able to shake. As I looked at all these people, I wondered what kind of specific and personal hell they might be enduring, and what it might be doing to them inside.

We are seeing an epidemic of cruelty in these days, a lack of empathy that leaves people feeling more alone than ever before. So many of the grieving, struggling, fearful human beings filling up the landscape we find ourselves in today are hanging by the very thinnest of threads. They are heroically pushing back despair, enduring real and imagined terrors, warring with their external circumstances *and* their internal demons. They are doing the very best they can, sometimes with little help or hope, and they need those of us who live alongside them to make that *best-doing* a little easier. This is when we bend low to meet them where their pain lives. It is where Jesus' feet always led him.

Every person around you has their Herod—that terrifying and persistent thing that assails them, the relentless fear-bringer that will not let them rest. With a listening ear or an act of simple kindness, step into their urgency and their unrest today. Bring the hope that offers them escape and helps them see a day beyond this one—and find a way to get them to Egypt.

Eyes on the Road

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

—MATTHEW 7:7

Growing up in Syracuse, New York, I heard the phrase “lake effect snow” at a very early age. The condition develops when air moves across large expanses of water (the Great Lakes); picks up moisture from lower, warmer layers of air; and moves it into the colder air above, freezing it and swiftly depositing it on land in large quantities of frozen precipitation. But I never knew this when I was younger, and I really didn’t care for the meteorological explanation. I just knew that it often snowed—a lot. I have countless memories of driving in sudden and complete whiteouts on rapidly disappearing roads that only a few moments earlier had been clear and unobstructed. It took every bit of attention to keep from sliding off the pavement and into the encroaching drifts beside us. You’d often arrive at your destination with your fingers cramped from white-knuckling the wheel the whole way, and perhaps a bit out of breath—but most of the time you

made it safely. Turns out that when you're that invested in a task, you tend to do pretty well.

Many years ago as a young youth leader, I was talking with my pastor about the future (one I was overly worried about), and he said, "John, do you know why a bluebird finds worms? Because that's what it looks for." He told me that much of what we discover in this life is about the questions we ask, the things we give attention to, and the way we invest our time. He reassured me that the more aware I was of the orientation of my life at any given moment, and the more intentional I was along the way, the more I could rest in knowing I'd eventually end up where I need to be. It's a truth I've held onto ever since: the spiritual journey isn't always one of seeing in real time, but about paying attention in the present, and the eventual arrival. This helps me when the road gets obscured and the way forward is difficult to spot.

Today you may be unsure of the road ahead, feeling fruitless in your efforts, or hopeless in the moment. Keep going. Rest in the knowledge that even in the squalls and whiteouts and places where the path seems unclear, you'll end up where you need to be.

Carry and Deliver

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

—LUKE 1:26–33

Growing up Catholic, I understood Mary the mother of Jesus very differently than I do today. When I was younger, she held this place of rarefied adoration that, while reverential, almost obscured the earthy reality

of her part in the story: the uncertainty and scandal in which she'd found herself. Largely lost on me was the fact that she was a young girl, already engaged, and suddenly with child of unfathomable origin—living surrounded by ordinary people who didn't read her story with the detached hindsight we have. The fear and the pressure of her circumstances would have been disorienting. She was invited into something beautifully terrifying, and she simply said, "Yes."

As I've gotten older, I've focused on Mary's *yes* in that moment, the way she accepted the invitation she'd been given, knowing it would also mean welcoming opposition. Today I see her as an ancestor in this journey, the first responder for those of us who seek to emulate Jesus in the world. Mary was asked to literally *carry and deliver* the love of God to a planet in dire need of such a thing. She willingly accepted the collateral damage of bearing goodness in a time and place in which doing so would prove difficult.

You and I get to play a similar role in this moment in the story of the planet, a place burdened with sadness and disconnect. We are similarly pregnant with a capacity to bring peace and kindness and healing. Today, think about the character traits of Jesus that resonate most deeply with you (especially those that seem lacking in the world), and realize that these are what you are invited to birth into the world: compassion, forgiveness, courage, honesty. Let goodness form within you today, and find a way to release it into the world.