

SANDHYA RANI JHA

# Liberating Love



365 LOVE NOTES  
FROM GOD

*A Daily Devotional*



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press**

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## Dedication

# Introduction

A friend of mine gave me a very popular daily devotional a few years ago to support my commitment to a deeper relationship with Christ. It was very sweet and very personal. The intent of the writer moved me deeply because the writer wanted every person to have a deep individual relationship with Jesus that led them to be a better individual. It was like most devotionals in this way—seemingly apolitical, oriented toward “me and Jesus,” and a little dose of encouragement for a person of faith dealing with the hardships of being human...and not really oriented toward the creating of God’s kingdom<sup>1</sup> here on earth, which is a message that shows up in almost every passage in the Bible but in very little devotional literature.

As I was picking the devotional up to take to the free book table at the nonprofit I run, I found myself thinking, “I wish there were a devotional like this for the rest of us...a devotional that connects us not just individually to Jesus but to each other, reminding us that every one of us was made in the image of God. A devotional that takes the scripture seriously enough not to engage it literally, but to actually take it seriously.”

And although I was alone in my apartment, I distinctly heard a voice say, “Yes. You need to do that.”

I received that word just before my father was rushed to the hospital and then ended up dying without ever regaining consciousness. I wrote about a quarter of it at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. It was a gift

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<sup>1</sup>I use the word *kingdom* because most of us cannot relate to a world with a king and because we know God is not one particular gender, as a king usually is, but we can possibly relate to a world where we are each other’s siblings or kin, which is a vision of heaven Jesus cast for us regularly. It is a personal preference I learned from womanist theologians maybe 15 years ago.

to stay grounded in the scripture<sup>2</sup> so that I was accompanied during that time and the time after by ancestors who knew hope and promise and grief and loneliness and companionship and hard times and comfort. It was also a gift to write it while surrounded by healers: the doctors and nurses, the cleaning and administrative staff, the chaplain, the woman who signed in visitors to the critical care unit. All were instrumental parts of the whole care process they sought to bring to patients, many of whom would not make it. They all influenced how aware I was of God as Healer while writing this devotional.

I want to acknowledge Pastor Larry Love from the farming community of Woodland, California, who is so committed to church folks understanding that God has ALWAYS sought our best lives and thriving, not JUST in the New Testament, and that God is almost chasing us to make sure we know God's love. Larry wrote a curriculum called *Dash Through the Bible* that people from my denomination studied across northern California in 2007. His subtle ways of teaching us to reject the anti-Semitic message that the Bible is about a vengeful Hebrew God of laws and a gentle New Testament God of love helped me reengage the Bible in such a life-giving way. Additionally, the illustrated book *Mannah in the Wilderness* was introduced to me by Rev. Deb Conrad from Flint, Michigan, when we were working with young adults volunteering with our denomination during the summer of 2016. I loved it so much that I assigned it to my niece as homework when she got in trouble and had to volunteer at my nonprofit the next winter. Finally, part of the theme of this devotional is about how the Bible speaks to us as community over and over. When I needed to do a final edit of this devotional, I couldn't imagine catching all the glitches by reading 366 devotions in a row myself, so I reached out to 11 friends so we could each take one month. My profound thanks to Riana Shaw Robinson, Kristi Laughlin, Yvonne Gilmore, Alan Dicken, Larry Morris, Chesla Nickelson, Jim Mitulski, Tuhina Rasche, Cinthia Kim Hengst, Amy Fourrier, and Gabriel Lopez. It takes a village to

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<sup>2</sup>(I used the *New Revised Standard Version*, NRSV, because it's the closest translation to the original, although in my own worship I often use the inclusive translation, and I also really love the *Jewish Study Bible*.)

understand God’s word, and it took a village to create a devotional. And after all, it took years of wrestling with the text in community for me to begin to attempt something like this. As Riana said to me, “this devotion is a gift for community, from community.” At its best, that is how we connect with the divine as well: in and through and with one another.

\* \* \*

I went to a church where we read portions of every book of the Bible when I was in fourth grade and again when I was in eighth. I read the vast majority again when I was in seminary, with lots of additional information to better understand the times in which it was written. And yet the great gift of God placing this task on my shoulders was reconnecting with the old friends of this book, the ones I don’t hang out with as much these days: Jonah and Demetrius and King Cyrus and Hannah. As I researched passages and began writing devotions, I couldn’t wait for others to get to hang out with those same friends.

My challenge in writing this faithfully was that so much is taken out of context in most devotionals; things meant for communities are warped to be only about individuals, when most of scripture is a guidebook on how to be God’s people PLURAL, not just God’s person SINGULAR. I want to connect people to the vibrant and living stories in the text, and it can be hard to inspire and not reduce the experience to lectures about historical context. This is why so many devotionals either end up being nonsubstantive, literal, or pedantic.

I tried my best to honor the life-giving stories of the Bible that still inspire me. I tried not to pull things out of context. I also skipped some really complicated texts that require a lot of interpretation because this isn’t the place for debate. God put on my heart the task of encouragement and hope and loving support in ways that do not place any of these texts above others, even though I have my own interpretations borne of deep study and deep prayer.

One of the things I was confronted with when reading the whole Bible (and you might be also, if you do): there were camps, teams, sides in the debate, because the Bible was written across time, as people were nuancing what it meant to be in community. Sometimes one rule would be REALLY important to preserving God's community, and other times almost its opposite was absolutely critical to protect the community. As we read the text, though, we don't think about how circumstances have changed and community needs have changed, and how different ideologies had the scrolls and ink. Here are a few examples of those competing beliefs that showed up as I read the Bible as one whole document, and how those different beliefs could show up almost as if the Bible were arguing with itself from chapter to chapter:

- Keep separate from non-Jews so the faith isn't corrupted.
- Don't shut out the foreigner.
- Sodom and Gomorrah were about sexual depravity.
- Sodom and Gomorrah were about a city that was without compassion.
- Follow the rules.
- Follow love.
- Follow the rules because of love.
- Slaves should be treated well.
- Slaves should be free.
- Slaves should tolerate whatever treatment they are given.
- God is furious and will destroy you.
- God is all compassion and mercy.

And note: these are not "angry God in the Hebrew Bible" and "merciful God in the New Testament." These tensions exist throughout the whole Bible as God's people were figuring out how to be God's people, and since I chose to use scriptures from the entire Bible, those tensions were a real challenge as I thought through God's relationship to each scripture.



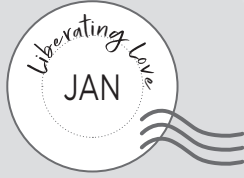
The thing that shows up indisputably, though, is the thousands of references to helping the poor and the widow and the orphan and the foreigner, and the call to treating workers well. The reason I am thankful God placed this task on my shoulders is this: I got the unexpected and long overdue luxury of living in the texts for a long stretch of time. There is a reason God's storybook endures. It is not magic. It is not only (I hope this doesn't sound heretical) that it is God's will that it endure. These stories from long ago are true to our time as well—a time of complexity and wrestling and longing and hope and struggling and overcoming, a time of God showing up in the midst of everything we face.

I hope it is not too presumptuous, but I did choose to write this devotional as if each devotion were written to you, the reader, by God. When you read the word "I" in the devotion, the "I" is my imagining of how God might talk about the scripture and God's relationship to you. I hope God doesn't think this is too presumptuous, and I hope it helps you engage your own relationship with God in some life-giving ways.

It is my earnest prayer that you find, within these pages, encouragement and inspiration, and that you feel connected to our all-loving God, to our spiritual ancestors, and also to your siblings, God's children all over the world. That, I believe, was the task God gave me, and if I succeeded in even the smallest way, I am grateful to have been given the chance.



# January



## January 1

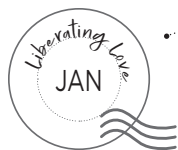
Genesis 1:1-3

• • •

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

• • •

I was there from the beginning, and I was there from *your* beginning. Today is a day for us to restart our journey together, and this I promise: I will always provide light for the journey. Today, I invite you to take a moment and revel in my creation, and to find ways to honor it and care for it. This is what I seek for us together this year: that you might grow closer to me and creation and that you might always feel my light around and inside you, even in the hard seasons. *If I could create all of this, what can't I create in you?*



## January 2

Matthew 2:13-15

• • •

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

• • •

**F**rom the first days of my Son's life, there were risks and threats and people who feared him. This world fears the power of Love. Today, I invite you to ask how you can be like Egypt, opening yourself to the forces of Love knocking at your door, fleeing to you. I created you as generous and compassionate. And I know this world will try to place fear in your heart. In order to walk closely with me, I ask you to find ways to embrace my Love and reject the forces of fear. Because, my beloved child, I made you for Love. You deserve Love.