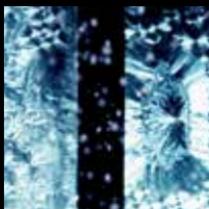


# Lighted Windows

An Advent calendar  
for a world in waiting



MARGARET SILF

UPDATED & REVISED  
EDITION

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An Advent calendar  
for a world in waiting

MARGARET SILF



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# Preface

It was a dark December night. I was driving through northern Europe on a pre-Christmas visit to friends. The journey was tedious, along endless kilometres of motorway, with little to relieve the monotony. In the intense darkness between built-up areas there seemed to be nothing to hold on to. Then I caught sight of a solitary Christmas tree on the roadside in the middle of nowhere, its lights twinkling bravely against the backdrop of a cold dark night. A delightful surprise! Yet my reaction was a bit ambivalent. On the one hand the tree spoke of courage and resilience, defying the darkness with the determined glow of its tiny lights. On the other hand, its very existence seemed so futile. What difference could a few little lights make to such a dark night? Perhaps it all depended on where I focused my attention—on the lights or on the darkness.

Many years ago, in 2002, *Lighted Windows* saw the light of day for the first time. A great deal has happened since then. In some ways the world has been turned upside down by immense changes that none of us could then have imagined. Much of that change has been challenging and sometimes terrifying, as the human family has faced the first clear manifestations of climate change, the faltering of many of our financial, political and religious institutions, and the impact of savage and indiscriminate brutality. Where are our lighted windows now? Will the lights on the tree of humanity prevail, or the surrounding darkness? Faith says ‘yes’ to the power of the light. Faith trusts that when the full story is told, light and life will ultimately prevail over darkness and death.

A person of faith is one who desires to live this level of trust in practice. It isn't easy. It is risky and counter-intuitive.

As I write, the first daffodils are coming into bloom. In the neighbourhood gardens the snowdrops and crocuses have been showing their colours for several weeks now. And the date? The third week in January! These flowers are living the risk of faith, pitching vulnerability against hope. While I rejoice in this premature springtime abundance, brought about by an unusually mild winter, my common sense tells me that this is not wise; that there may be many winter storms still to face. Should I rejoice over the January daffodils or bewail their fragility and unpreparedness for what might still lie ahead, their apparent helplessness in the face of unforeseeable situations?

There is a saying that 'faith is like the bird that feels the light and sings before the dawn' (Rabindrath Tagore, 1861–1941). And there are indeed birds who sing their solitary songs about half an hour before the regular dawn chorus begins. If we ask what it might mean to live our faith in a dark world and not to lose heart, perhaps the January daffodils, the lonely Christmas tree and the bird who greets the light before it actually arrives can help and encourage us. *Lighted Windows* is written in this spirit. It invites you to trust the light of your own small candle in a world that can feel hostile and forbidding, and to notice the many other lights that await you along the way, if you have eyes to see, and if you refuse to let your heart focus only on the darkness. It invites you to look beyond your own feelings of helplessness in the face of world situations, and trust in an unseen, yet foundational goodness holding all in being.

At Christmas we remember that a newborn child in a makeshift shelter has become the most potent proof of an

indestructible strength that lies in the heart of our human fragility. Today helpless children are camping on our own borders. Migrant families fleeing violence and terror arrive on our own shores every day. How can we light up a window in the heart of the world's desperation today? If God-with-us is the reality that our faith affirms, that reality must be born again and again, in our own time and our own place, and in ways we might prefer to ignore. The seasons of Advent and Christmas remind us that *now* is the time and *ours* is the place in which God is labouring to come to birth.

May your own Advent journey, and your life's journey, be guided by unexpected lights along the roadside that refuse to be extinguished. May it be accompanied by melodies celebrating that which has not yet arrived. And may we ourselves become bearers of a Spirit-kindled light in a world that longs, like never before, for hope and trust and a reason to believe in the best that humanity can become.

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## Introduction

# Lighted Windows

The First of December, and Christmas is just around the corner! It's the season of expectation, of hope, of anticipation. A season of dreams, and, for Christians, a season where the deepest dream of all humankind meets, face to face, with God's own dream for God's creation, made visible and tangible to everyone who seeks.

One of my most abiding memories is of an evening shared with a friend who had experienced a particularly traumatic childhood. We were talking about our favourite fairy stories, and she told me, with tears in her eyes, of how much the story of 'The Little Match-girl' had come to mean for her, not just in her dreams but in her Christian journeying too.

'The Little Match-girl' wasn't a story I was familiar with, but as she retold it, it came to life in a way that reflects, for me, something of the spirit of this Advent journey. The little match-girl was a young child, undernourished and very poor. She earned her daily bread by selling matches, but the earnings were sparse, and at home a cruel father was waiting to punish her if she failed to bring home enough money. One dark winter night she was standing in her usual place, shivering, and gazing at the lighted windows of the big houses all around her, catching fleeting glimpses of all that was going on inside those rooms—the preparations for

Christmas, the lovely gifts, the bright decorations, the happy faces, the smell of Christmas puddings and roasting goose.

All she had was a box of matches, and there were no customers tonight—they all had other things on their minds. ‘Dare I strike one?’ she wondered. She took out a match, and struck it, gazing for a few brief moments into its blaze of light. As she did so, she imagined that it was one of those lighted windows. She looked inside, in her imagination, and entered into a warm room where loving friends might welcome her. Another match; another scene. Another window to look into. Perhaps a fine dinner set out for a family. The crackling of the goose, the aroma of mince pies. Food and shelter. And so she continued, until she came to the last match in the box.

The story has a bittersweet ending. As she strikes her last match, the little match-girl sees a shooting star falling across the night sky, and her granny is standing there, smiling, waiting to gather the child into her arms and carry her home to heaven. The frozen child is discovered the next morning, with an empty matchbox in her hands and a deep, contented smile across her white face.

This Advent journey invites you to share something of the magic and the mystery of what it means to look into some of your own ‘lighted windows’. But these are not the windows of fantasy. They are the windows of our common quest to discover ‘God-with-us’—Emmanuel, God incarnate in the world of everyday reality with all its shame and its glory. They are like the ‘windows’ of an Advent Calendar, leading us ever closer to the mystery that is born in Bethlehem.

During the first three weeks of the journey, we look, day by day, into a series of windows opening up into glimpses of how we might discover God’s guidance in our lives, how we

might become more trusting of that guidance, and how we might catch something of God's wisdom.

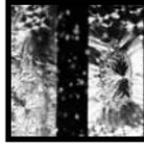
During Christmas week, the 'windows' open wide, inviting us to enter right into the heart of the mystery of God's coming to earth.

And as the journey moves on through to the turning of the year, and the feast of the Epiphany, the windows turn into doors, through which we are sent out again into a world that is waiting—and longing—for the touch of God's love upon its broken heart.

The child who comes to us in Bethlehem is also cradled in bitter sweetness, like the child in the story. The starlight will turn into the interrogator's beam; the straw will become a crown of thorns. Yet this will be the eye of the needle that will open into a wholeness and completeness that our earthbound hearts and minds cannot begin to imagine.

Each day's reflection includes an invitation to look into its 'window' in a way that connects the God-story with *your* story and *your* circumstances, in a personal way—a way that makes a difference—so that God-with-us becomes ever more authentically God-with-*you*.

May your journey be blessed and joyful, and may it lead you daily more deeply into who you truly are—the person God dreamed you to be when God created you.



1–7 December

## Glimpses of Guidance

Most of us find ourselves wishing from time to time that ‘someone would show us the way’. During the next few days we look at some of the ways in which guidance is given and how we react to it.

We begin and end this part of the Advent journey with John the Baptist—a man who allowed God to guide him, and who became a guide to others. As the days go by, we pause to reflect on how God’s guidance is to be found in:

- The call to take risks (1 December)
- The tendency of God to break right through our careful planning (2 December)
- The touch of God when we are in the pits of despair (3 December)
- The leading of God through our life’s mazes (4 December)
- The challenge to go beyond set ‘answers’ (5 December)
- The choices we make, moment by moment (6 December)
- The signposts we discover, that point beyond themselves to God (7 December)

1 December

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## Risks

Then there appeared to [Zechariah] an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son and you will name him John... He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God...’

Zechariah said to the angel, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.’ The angel replied, ‘I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.’

...When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived...

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, ‘No; he is to be called John.’ They said to her, ‘None of your relatives has this name.’ Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God.

LUKE 1:11–24, 57–64 (ABRIDGED)

‘If only God would write divine instructions across the sky,’ we might often be tempted to think. If only it were obvious what we should do, which direction we should choose, how we should react to a particular person or situation. But life rarely gives us that kind of certainty. More often our choices and decisions are full of ambiguity and mixed motivation, and the best we can hope for is to do a minimum of harm—a goal so far removed from the desire that burns in our hearts to live true to the very best of our visions.

Perhaps, as the years go by, our attempts to follow the path of God, however we envision it, may become like Zechariah’s—refined, but also reduced, to the faithful fulfilment of a set of obligations and the leading of what might pass as ‘a good life’. Such faithfulness is never to be despised. It can be the seedbed of God’s kingdom. Unfortunately, it can all too easily turn into a comfort zone. We feel so settled in our holy niche that we stop even expecting God to intervene in our lives. We carry on ‘burning our incense’. We keep on tending that flickering little fire within us that still burns with a love for God. But we don’t expect to wake up one morning and discover that the flames are suddenly leaping out of control. Neither did Zechariah!

In short, our waiting upon God can become simply the habit of waiting, for its own sake—like waiting day on day in line at the bus-stop, but being wholly unprepared for the possibility that the bus might actually arrive. So stunned are we when the bus turns up that we step back in disbelief, and refuse to get on board. How do we know that the bus isn’t some figment of our imagination? How do we know that this is really ‘our’ bus, and will take us to where we want to be? What if we can’t pay the fare? What if it all turns out to be too costly? Maybe it would be just so much easier, and safer,

to stay in line at the bus-stop. After all, we know where we are when we're standing at the bus-stop. Who knows where we might end up if we get on the bus?

We might imagine Zechariah going through a process of thought a bit like this. His faithful lifelong prayers for God's guidance are suddenly answered, and he doesn't know how to respond. His coping mechanism is to try to interpret the divine touch of God in terms of merely human logic: 'This doesn't make sense within my terms of reference, so I will dismiss it.' But God's touch, as we know from our own experience, confounds human logic and goes far beyond it. Often, the best, most visionary things we do in life are fuelled not by reason and logic but by intuition, imagination and desire.

Zechariah's story encourages me. It reminds me that I'm not the only one to fail to recognise God's guidance even when it is given to me on a plate, and that however stubbornly I fail to respond, God's purposes will not be deflected on that account. Elizabeth's child is going to come into the world, whatever his father may think about the possibility. It is Zechariah, and not God, who is disempowered by his refusal to respond to the guidance he is being given.

I am encouraged too by the fact that the disempowerment was not permanent. Just as the infant John would need nine months' gestation before coming to birth, so Zechariah is also given a time of gestation in which his response can grow and ripen into the whole-hearted 'Yes' expressed in the moment when he writes on the tablet, 'His name is John.'

God will wait for our response and will wait for as long as it takes.

'How will I know that this is so?'

When you got up this morning, you had no idea what the day would bring. But you probably chose to take a chance on it, and not go back to bed. God invites us to take a chance on life too, without knowing where God's guidance will lead us. To the extent that we can say 'Yes', we will discover the next step along the way. To the extent that we hold back, we will get stuck where we are, until we are ready to move on again. How do you feel about the response you want to make to God in the light of the challenges today will bring?

*Lord, I can't see the bright sunlight of your leading, because my eyes are focused on the little candle of my own thinking. Blow out the candle if you must, and give me the grace to see your light in my darkness. Amen*

2 December

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## Plans

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

EXODUS 3:1-12 (ABRIDGED)

I wonder how many years of my life I have actually spent 'waiting'. I don't mean just those hours waiting in queues or in traffic jams, or on one end of multiple-choice telephone

lines with no sign of a human being at the other. At times like that, the ‘waiting game’ is an obvious frustration. No, I am thinking more of all those days I have spent staring out of the office window or at the view from the kitchen sink, thinking to myself that everything will be better when such-and-such happens. With this kind of mindset, I have spent literally years and years waiting—waiting for the holidays to come round, for the boss to move on, for the next promotion or the next exam, waiting for children to arrive, waiting for them to grow up and be independent and then waiting for them to come home again to visit! The grass is quite simply *always* going to be greener around the next bend in the road.

The same kind of logic has shaped my search for God’s guidance in my life. I have sat down in prayer, and set out my plans, pointing out, in ways God surely couldn’t misunderstand, exactly where I needed help. And then I have been unpleasantly surprised when that guidance wasn’t, apparently, forthcoming.

Maybe Moses was prey to thoughts like these, too, as he tended his father-in-law’s flocks at Horeb. He had been forced to flee from justice, having killed an Egyptian who was harassing one of the Israelites—a change of plan that he had probably not bargained for. And we find him now looking after the sheep, biding his time, and keeping a low profile.

God has other plans. Into the midst of Moses’ neat arrangements comes a burning bush! Suddenly he is confronted by something wholly unexpected. Thankfully, for all of us, Moses had enough space in his heart and mind to give God a chance to break through. He had the grace to see the burning bush and to take it seriously. He was willing to put his own planning on hold and, as it were, switch channels, to listen to what God was trying to communicate.

What can we learn from this encounter about the pattern of God's guidance? A few thoughts come to mind:

- God's guidance attracts us, it doesn't coerce us.
- It usually takes us by surprise.
- It happens when we are going about our everyday living, and it grows out of that everyday experience, if we have eyes to see.
- It is not destructive, although it sometimes seems as if it will be. We have to cross a threshold of trust if we want to engage with it.
- We have to come close enough to hear it.
- We will recognise it in those moments when we sense that we are on holy ground.
- It may lead us to where we would rather not go.

God's guidance may begin with a peak experience for ourselves, but it is given for the benefit of more than just ourselves. Our God is a relational God—a trinity of Father, Son and Spirit—and the guidance God gives is not just for ourselves, but to be put into practice in a relational, interdependent world.

*'The place on which you are standing  
is holy ground'*

Perhaps you can look back on moments that have shaped or reshaped your life. It might be helpful to reflect on these experiences in the light of Moses' encounter with the burning bush. How did you react when you felt God's touch on your life in some powerful way? What guidance was given? How did it tally with your own 'planning'? Was it just for you, or did it have wider implications? How did you work it out in practice? Or perhaps you didn't recognise it at all at the

time, but can only see its outworkings with the benefit of hindsight.

An acquaintance of mine, whose life had been recently derailed, once said to me, 'What makes God laugh? Answer: People who make plans!' Let us not become so entangled in the shaping of our years that we miss the signpost that is standing right here in the present moment.

*Lord, please help me to laugh, with you, about my own  
so-serious planning, and then let us move on together in  
the light of your surprises. Amen*



## The world waits...

—sometimes holding its breath in fear of what tomorrow may bring, sometimes in a haze of busyness or boredom, in which we hardly know what we are waiting for. Yet we still wait in hopefulness. The birth of a baby invariably stirs deep wells of hope in the human heart. Perhaps in this generation, things will get better. Perhaps this child will make a difference.

As we approach the Christmas season we prepare to celebrate the coming to earth of someone who really does make a difference. In this season, the 'windows' of our human experience can change from rows of faceless panes, perhaps grimy with dirt, into lighted windows that open up new possibilities and coax us into a place where rejoicing might be possible.

The journey mapped out in this book is an invitation to look into some of these lighted windows, and discover a few reflections of what we wait for and long for—reflections of God's guidance, his call to trust him and live by his wisdom.

Each window seeks to bring familiar scripture into focus with everyday living, encouraging us to enter right into the place where God is coming to birth, and to make the experience of Bethlehem our own. And finally, the windows become doors, through which we are sent back to a waiting world to share our personal experience of God-with-us.

MARGARET SILF is a Christian writer who appeals across denominations. She is the author of a number of books for 21st-century spiritual pilgrims and spends much of her time on the road, facilitating retreats and workshops at home and overseas. She is a mother and grandmother and lives in Staffordshire, England.

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