

Reflections for Advent and Christmas  
A Grace in the Moment Book

Mary van Balen



*To the many people who have shared their  
Advent and Christmas journeys with me*

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*Author's note:* The names, details, and circumstances may have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned in this publication.

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## Introduction

When Mike Collins, editor of the diocesan newspaper, The Catholic Times, asked me to write a monthly column, I nervously said “Yes.” Even though I had published a few magazine articles and guest essays, I still wondered about coming up with something to write every month. A year looked like a long time, and three young children were keeping me busy.

Thirty years and some 360 columns later, I’m still writing. My children have grown and moved away. I’ve worked as an educator teaching children and adults, designing curriculum, and teaching theology as an adjunct instructor at a university.

I’ve been a retail associate, a technical writer, and am a retreat presenter and spiritual director. Like everyone, my life has taken unexpected turns, some exciting, some painful. All transforming.

Writing my column, *Grace in the Moment*, has been a constant thread, weaving through it all. Life happens and staying with it is a challenge. Trusting that God is always present requires faith. Sometimes I have it, and sometimes I struggle to hold on. Writing is prayer for me. It slows me down and opens my eyes to the Sacred in the midst of life, clearing out and deepening the center where I go to quietly be with the Source of all.

## Reflections for Advent and Christmas

I am grateful to the Catholic Times and to its readers for providing the opportunity to share my reflections on the journey. I also appreciate the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation republishing a number of these columns in similar form on *Shalem Friday Blog*.

In response to readers' requests for a collection of these writings, I've gathered, sorted, and compiled this small book of columns centered on Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany themes. While I have done some editing, the columns appear basically as they did when originally published. I offer them humbly, hoping that my efforts and struggles to recognize and respond to God in the mess of everyday life will encourage others to recognize that Loving Presence in their own lives.

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## Advent

Drawing All into Love's Circle

Advent: "Both/And"

Choices Create More Room in Our Hearts

Advent Requires Space to Ponder the Mystery

A New Way to Pray Through Advent

Advent Meaning in a World of Turmoil

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Advent: More Making Room than Giving Up

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Widening Circles

Being Patient with Ourselves

How to Celebrate in a Broken World

When the Holy One Entered Our Time and Space

Do the Best You Can and Trust

Hearts and Hospitality

## Drawing All into Love's Circle

After a lovely and unusual Thanksgiving weekend spent with my two sisters and their husbands, I was caught unawares by Advent. Oh, in a vague sort of way I knew it was coming, but I was busy with work, publishing a book, and cleaning the house for my company.

When they left on Saturday afternoon, I ran errands and fell asleep stretched out on the couch. Then suddenly it was Sunday, and I had not prepared a wreath. Resisting the urge to run out and buy candles, I decided to use what was already around the house.

Over the years, my wreath has evolved into something decidedly untraditional. Forty years ago, inspired by Black Elk (a Lakota holy man who, I later learned, converted to Catholicism and became a catechist), I sewed and beaded four tiny red leather pouches filled with a mixture of sage and sweet grass symbolic of kinnikinnick used by some Native Americans in their great peace pipes and in other rituals.

The pouches rested on four direction points of my wreath: North, East, South, and West. A feather, shells, and a small buffalo cut from leather also decorated the pine boughs, a reminder that God is the Creator of all things, and that all things are made holy by the Incarnation.



Eventually, allergies and bronchitis set off by aromatic resin and the mold that clings to freshly cut pine necessitated their removal. I thought about artificial greenery but decided against it.

Instead, I used beeswax vigil candles arranged on a round linen doily or tray covered with a deep blue cloth. The little pouches, feather, shells, and buffalo remained. A stone from the shores of the Sea of Galilee, gift from a friend, became a regular addition. Once I added a bird's nest and soft, dried pompous grass plumes. Everything belongs in this circle. We stand on holy ground.

This year, I found tucked in a drawer some beeswax candles from Burton Parish, the colonial Episcopalian church in Williamsburg, VA. The tapers would just fit into the two simple glass candelabra that my parents had used to decorate the table at their wedding reception.

I washed and dried the candle holders, remembering an old photo of my parents, their families, and friends gathered around a long table in Dad's family home for the celebration. The candelabra would gather my family and the human family into the circle of my "wreath."

Along with the usual items, a wooden frog from Thailand, a fossil scallop picked up along the York River under a super moon's shine, a smooth piece of chert from a Paris walkway, and an arrowhead found on a Cape Cod beach joined the circle.

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All the earth sits with me as I light the candles and remember the mystery of Jesus walking with us. Each night my parents and ancestors sit with me as do the people who were here first and who struggle still to protect the land and water that sustain us all. The human family. I am reminded of the ages and ages of this earth, of the creatures that filled it. The plants and animals, the birds and the sea creatures. We are a small part of an unimaginably huge cosmos. God loves it all and entered into our little corner to show us just how much.

The words of Isaiah that appear throughout our Advent liturgies overflow with images of nature: Crooked paths made straight. Parched land exulting. Steppes rejoicing and blooming with abundant flowers. Enemies, the lion and the lamb, lying down together. An old stump that looks dead sprouts a green shoot. Things are not always what they appear to be.

Isaiah says God will not judge by appearance. God stands with the poor and stands for justice.

Glorious words.

I sit at my dining room table, looking at my “wreath” and longing for such a time. Advent tells me that time is already here. We celebrate Emanuel, God with us. Jesus draws the circle that encompasses all and invites us to join the work. He showed us how to live our lives, a part of God’s own, so the circle continues to grow in our time and place.

I sit at my dining room table, watching candle flames push  
away early morning darkness, and I have hope.

## Advent: “Both/And”

I looked up the word *advenio* in my old Latin dictionary and found that depending on how it’s used, the verb can mean “to draw near” or “to arrive.” The noun, *adventus* is also translated as either “approach” or “arrival.” The season of Advent encompasses both. We wait. We celebrate what has already come. It’s the “both/and” of our faith. God is coming. God is already here.

During this season, we ponder that mystery and our participation in it. Liturgical readings are one place to start. For example, the first week of Advent is filled with passages from what is often called “First Isaiah” and provides glorious images of the kingdom to come: people from all nations streaming up the mountain of God, desiring to learn and walk in God’s ways; a kingdom where all live together in peace; great feasts where God provides rich food and choice wine for everyone.

Isaiah paints more pictures: justice for the poor and vulnerable, abundant harvests, broad pastures and running streams. He shows us a God who does not judge by appearances and who responds immediately to the people’s cries. These images were proclaimed in an eighth century BCE Judah that bears a resemblance to our current world situation. The Introduction to Isaiah in the Saint Mary’s Press College Study Bible describes the wealthy getting richer at the expense of the poor and nations posturing for war.

Despite the sins of the people, Isaiah's prophecies of the Holy One's faithfulness and the eventual arrival of a messianic king provided hope along with the calls for repentance to those who heard them. Isaiah's words provide hope for us too, reminding us that God is merciful as well as just, and that with Grace, dark times that challenge and demand we heed God's word will not last forever.

Advent gospels speak of God already come. They tell not only the story of John the Baptist and how Jesus was born into our world through the faith and willingness of a young Jewish girl. They also tell of his public ministry, proclaiming God's kingdom with words and actions. He healed the sick, confronted those in positions of power, and showed compassion for the poor and struggling. When asked what was most important, he replied it was love—love of God, self, and neighbor.

Jesus was open to surprise, amazed at the deep faith coming not from the Israelites, but from "the other"—a centurion. Echoing Isaiah, Jesus told his followers that they'd be sharing the heavenly banquet with people they mightn't have expected, coming from east and west.

He relied on others to share in his work. When the huge crowd that had been listening to him for days needed to be fed, Jesus asked first that those present share what they had. Then he blessed it. Before sending his disciples out to spread the good news, he lamented that there was much work to be done and few to do it.

Yes, God is already here, and has been since before time as we know it began. Yet, “God is coming.” The events in our world, far from echoing the visions of Isaiah or the example of Jesus, speak of the need for this coming. The poor and vulnerable, so close to Jesus’ heart, are still abused and overlooked by those grasping for power and wealth. Nations continue to prepare for and to wage war. We are far from beating swords into plowshares.

Jesus knew that being faithful to the commandment of love can bring suffering and death in a world unwilling to accept it. After his death and resurrection, he sent the Spirit who dwells within each of us and in every bit of creation. We are part of the “both/and,” the coming” and the “already here.”

How do we live in the tension of this mystery? How do we join in God’s work today? How do we live in dark times and still have both faith in God-with-us and hope in God- to-come? Perhaps, during Advent we can take quiet time to listen for the Spirit that lives in our hearts. To become aware of our part in giving birth to that bit of divinity that has been shared with us and that the world sorely needs. We are not only graced with the Presence of God with us, we are called to do our part in birthing the God who is yet to come.

## Choices Create More Room in Our Hearts

As I write, sun brightens a neighbor's sugar maple, and the temperature is over 70. Soon, leaves will be gone, and we will be scraping windshields. I'm reluctant to see liturgical ordinary time come to an end. Holiday seasons, despite my best efforts, become overly busy and frustrating. Like today's weather, I'm hanging on to summer—only it's the pace, not the weather, I'd keep.

In two weeks, Advent begins: a time set aside to ponder the Incarnation. Sometimes, I marvel that the world could hold God at all. How could earth not tremble and fall apart under Jesus's feet? How did atoms and the forces binding them together persist in their ancient dance when the Creator passed by? Like iron filings near a magnet, I wonder that they weren't pulled into new patterns by his presence.

Only by God's grace is creation able to hold together and receive some part of the Divine. The gift of faith enables us to be open and receptive as God continues to enter into our world. By what mystery do we, who are limited, become bearers of the Infinite? I don't know, but I suspect that capacity, like the mystery of human life, develops slowly, dependent not upon our invention, but upon our cooperation.

When I was a young adult, my mother left the job she loved to stay home and care for her mother, who had become

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confined to bed. I tried to imagine myself doing the same in a similar situation. I couldn't. One day we talked about it.

"How do you do it, Mom?" I asked. "I wouldn't be able to."

"You're nineteen. I don't know that I could have done it when I was nineteen either. But you change. Life looks different when you're fifty-one."

I wondered what would change.

Years later, a retreat master spoke about a person's responsibility for their capacity to experience God. While it is a gift, it does not remain static. Everyone can respond to life in ways that deepen faith. Being open to God in one's life enlarges the capacity to love. On the other hand, a person can refuse grace. One can act out of selfishness and fear. Then, the spirit shrivels and is able to hold less of God's loving presence.

"We're not like glass bottles of fixed sizes and shapes," he would say. "We can stretch and expand to hold more, or our spirits can wither and shrink."

Every day brings choices: to remain angry or to become vulnerable and talk about the hurt; to get up early to pray and read scripture or to sleep in; to throw away or to recycle; to confront a problem at work or to hope someone else does. Large or small, free choice alters one's potential to love. My mother had recognized this truth. That is what changes.



Like all gifts, the ability to respond to God is given, not for ourselves, but for others. If the “butterfly effect” is fact, and the fluttering of wings in New York affects weather halfway around the world, then certainly, movement of a heart away from or toward God affects all creation.

A gospel reading invites us to think about how we are shaping this gift. The story is familiar: Leaving on a journey, the master entrusts his property to the care of his servants. Each is given a number of talents. Some servants invest the talents, but one, fearful of his master, buries his rather than risk losing it. Often, the talents in the story are equated with our personal aptitudes.

Maybe the story is more about the gift of faith and our capacity for God. Identifying with the fearful servant might be difficult when thinking of developing talents. (Although we may not use them to their maximum, surely we have done something with what we have been given.) Seeing our similarity to that servant becomes easier when we see him as someone afraid to take a risk, to step out in faith.

This parable may have been Jesus’ challenge to religious leaders of his time. They weren’t open to receive the grace of the moment: God’s revelation of self through Jesus. They were fearful and closed their hearts. The story also challenges us. How open are we to receive and allow Grace to flow through us? How willing are we to change and grow in order to follow Jesus more perfectly?

## Reflections for Advent and Christmas

During this season, I'll try not to spend inordinate amounts of time fighting crowds while looking for perfect presents. Instead, I'll use more of Advent's time to become aware of the choices I make. Then, when Christmas arrives, my heart will have more room to hold the continuing miracle of God's presence on earth.