

# SOUL SCENTS: FLOURISH Selections for Advent

Paula Moldenhauer

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Free to Flourish Publishing  
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Artwork: Lisa-Joy, [www.facebook.com/lisajoyart](http://www.facebook.com/lisajoyart)

Cover Design:

Kim Liddiard of the Creative Pixel, [www.thecreativepixel.com](http://www.thecreativepixel.com)

Project Management:

Carmen Barber, [KeepingYouWriting@gmail.com](mailto:KeepingYouWriting@gmail.com)

Editor:

Marjorie Vawter, [www.marjorievawter.com](http://www.marjorievawter.com)

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## Dedication

*To each who longs to celebrate in freedom  
and worship with depth.*

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## **A Note from the Author**

Dear Friend,

Maybe you struggle as I do to celebrate Christmas in complete freedom. Or maybe you long as I do to worship Jesus more deeply during the holidays. My path to jubilant celebration and deep, true worship during this particular season is long and full of potholes, even harder than my every-day normal journey. I open these Advent devotions sharing personal stories in hope that together we can take new steps in loving our Jesus in joy and liberty at Christmas!

My background had no room for Advent worship. I didn't even know what an Advent season was for much of my life. Over time I've come to look forward to the month beginning the first Sunday after Thanksgiving and continuing until Christmas as a time to reflect specifically on the wonder of Jesus coming, Light into darkness, to save this world (and you and me personally).

The traditional specifics of Advent differ depending on church and cultural background. Some, like the Irish, have a longer Advent season. Some people use Advent calendars, candles, readings and/or prayers to focus their hearts on Jesus during the time leading up to Christmas. Even the specifics goals of Advent can differ from church to church or culture to culture. For many, the purpose of Advent is to prepare hearts to welcome the Christ child.

My goal for these Advent devotions is simple: to draw nearer to Jesus. I start the readings with longer selections—personal stories—that illustrate how captive I was to doing things *right* instead of living in the joyful experience of simply celebrating Jesus. As the daily readings continue into the weeks closer to Christmas, the devotions get shorter, allowing for the busy holiday season. I hope you'll be blessed by the simple joy of taking a few moments to focus on the One who the holiday fuss is really all about.

*Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Advent* includes a thought to ponder as you start your week each Sunday, followed by 5 week-day readings. (Of course you can read all of that on a Saturday if you have a crazy week. This isn't about a prescribed journey, it's about pausing to dig deeper into the worship and celebration of Jesus this holiday

season.) For the last few years I've enjoyed lighting Advent candles, in part for the simple reason that they are beautiful! Beauty often draws me to worship.

I also love the symbolism of Jesus as the Light of the world. I think about how fire represents passion, and I want Him to flame my passion for our relationship. The traditional approach to Advent candles includes lighting a candle each Sunday to start a new week. (The first week you light one, the second two, and so on.) I usually can't resist lighting the candles most every day, not just Sunday. I often do this while I focus on an Advent reading or pray or listen to music that celebrates the nativity. (Of course then I wonder why my candles don't last all the way to Christmas. I've learned to buy more than one set each year. Ha!)

Christian traditions which include the lighting of Advent candles often have specific colors of candles connected to specific spiritual concepts. If my suggestions differ from your tradition, change it up! If you've never done Advent candles before and want direction, I suggest 3 purple candles, a pink candle, and a white candle. They are easy to find and, hey, purple and pink are favorite colors of mine! (But seriously! It's about choosing to worship, not how you do it, so feel free to do your own thing!) In my approach the purple candles stand for hope, peace, and love. The pink stands for joy. The white candle is for our spotless Savior, and is lit on Christmas Day.

The colored candles are usually placed in a wreath and the white candle, which is larger, is placed in the center. Some traditions say the wreath symbolizes the infinite love of God or eternal life given to us through Jesus. If you choose to light a weekly candle, consider doing it as you ponder the weekly thought I've included. At the end of each week we've also included a place to jot notes about your response to the week's readings. If you choose to take this Advent journey again next year, consider making a new entry with a new date. It's cool to see how God moves in our lives over the years.

I pray *Selections for Advent* is a blessing in your journey into His embrace during this Advent season. May He reveal to you how valuable and beloved you are to Him. May you constantly know Him more intimately and be set free to be all He created you to be.

May we all live in flourishing freedom.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paula". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping 'P' and a trailing flourish at the end.

P.S. These selections for Advent were taken from weeks nine through twelve of the thirteen-week devotional book, *Soul Scents: Flourish*, available on Amazon.com in print



and electronic formats. The devotions in *Selections for Advent* are re-labeled weeks one through four to coincide with the weeks of Advent celebration.



## **Week One ~ Christmas Memories**



## **First Sunday of Advent**

### **Light:**

One purple candle

### **Ponder:**

*Hope*

Do a soul check. What are you hoping for this holiday season? Which hopes have a realistic chance of being met? Which will take a miracle? Pause to lay your hopes before God.

As we light the hope candle, we look forward to Christmas and celebrating a fulfilled promise. The Messiah, the Savior of the world, has come! We also look forward to the hope of eternity with Him and to the day when He will physically return to this earth and bring peace. Thankfully hope is present in our daily life too. We have hope because God takes a personal interest in our life situations.

Scripture says when hope is deferred it makes the heart “sick.” Is there a place where you find it difficult to hope? Offer it into the Lord’s care and ask Him to restore a hopeful spirit in you.

There is one place that hope never disappoints. We can always have hope in the love of Jesus. Romans 5:5 says, “And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love” (NLT).

No matter what hopes are dashed or met beyond your expectations this holiday season, the hope Jesus offers cannot be stolen from you. You are dearly loved. His trip to earth purchased your freedom from darkness and promises you an eternal destiny in the Kingdom of Light. You can hope in Jesus and His ability to make beauty out of ashes.

**Prayer:**

Jesus, establish my hope in You this Advent season. Protect this precious gift. Refocus my heart on the hope that never disappoints when the season becomes stressful. You know my heart's desires for this holiday season. I surrender them to You. Keep me hopeful and free no matter what the next four weeks hold. Give me a heart that delights in the hopeful promise of being dearly loved. Heal the places in my heart that feel unloved and deepen my worship of You, the only One who loves me perfectly. I praise You for Your perfect love, Jesus. I *do* hope in You.

**Worship:**

Sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*.



*Week One ~ Christmas Memories*

**Day 1: The Avocado Plant**

*Christ made us free. Stay that way. Do not get chained all over again in the Law and its kind of religious worship.*

*~ Galatians 5:1 NLV*

The ribbons and bows looked funny on that avocado plant, but my little brother and I beamed at our parents, showing off our “Christmas tree.” To their credit they didn’t reprimand us, but the delight my nine-year-old heart hoped to see in their eyes was pain instead. They hated to disappoint us, but they couldn’t encourage such “pagan” behavior. See, I was raised with the belief that Christmas and all its trappings were not of God. Jesus was from God. He was sent to save us. But Christmas was not His birthday, and the Christmas tree was nothing more than leftovers from people who worshiped a false god.

It was to be another forty years before I owned my first Christmas tree.

Our daughter, Sarah, was three the first Christmas Jerry and I no longer worshiped in the denomination of my childhood. The church we attended had a tall, two-story Christmas tree. Lovely, it captured my heart and Sarah’s. But steps away from childhood beliefs are often tiny and faltering.

“When are we getting our Christmas tree?” our daughter asked from her booster seat.

“We aren’t planning to get one.” I tried to keep my tone light.

“Then I will go and get one myself.”

Knowing Sarah was too small to carry out her plans, I didn’t answer her. I wasn’t comfortable giving her the theology of my childhood, but I was not yet ready to embrace Christmas, especially the pagan tree. I would belt out “Joy to the World”—oh how I love that song—but trees were a different story. Still the yearning of my nine-year-old heart had never faded. How I craved celebration! How I longed to understand

how to celebrate the birth of the One who'd been my faithful companion since childhood.

How hungry I was for *freedom*.

I watched others I respected. The leader of the women's Bible study and I had a conversation about the origins of some of the Christmas decorations. She agreed that many had been used in pagan worship.

"Then why are you comfortable with them?" I asked.

"God knows the intent of my heart. I don't see pagan symbols, I see beauty that draws me to worship."

I pondered her response as well as the approach my brother took. He married a wonderful Christian woman who loves her Christmas traditions. Their family always has a beautiful Christmas tree, which they cut themselves in the woods near their mountain home. "I am not worshiping the tree," my brother told me. "God made the tree. It is beautiful, and we enjoy decorating it. When I look at it, I think of its Creator."

As a young writer, I interviewed other moms at Christmas and wrote articles about their favorite traditions and how they worshiped. I listened intently. What value was beneath their traditions? How did they point to Jesus?

Always seeking. Trying to understand.

One friend shared with me about an especially intimate time she'd had with Jesus. One night after her family was in bed He prompted her to grab her journal and come away with Him for some alone time saying, "Come sit under the Christmas tree with Me."

It was hard to process. If the tree was evil, why did Jesus invite her to sit close to it and enjoy its beauty?

Maybe it was that picture of intimacy which most broke through my reserves.

I longed to savor the magic of Christmas with Jesus.

Eventually I embraced the idea of celebrating Jesus, from the heart, at Christmas time. But the progression of thought about *how* to do that has been a life-long journey. Jerry and I struggled for years with what was "right" and what was "wrong" in a nativity celebration. In the early years I bought a nativity and displayed it in the fall because I'd been taught Jesus was actually born in October. Increasingly I felt I *must* celebrate the event that caused angels to fill the sky singing "Glory in the Highest!" but I didn't feel the freedom to celebrate in December with the rest of the world. In my efforts to do everything "right," a nativity set in October was the best I could do. Eventually I longed for solidarity with my Christian brothers and sisters. As I longed

for the communal celebration, the oneness with the body of Jesus, the nativity went up in December.

As I look to the Advent season this year, I think worrying about the “hows” of celebration misses the point entirely. What I truly yearn for is freedom to worship. However and whenever I feel the desire rise up within. I want to think less about the “right” way to worship and simply do it in joy. This day, Christmas, was stolen from me. In my desire for purity, I missed the freedom of redemption. In my efforts to follow Jesus perfectly, I missed an opportunity to worship Him fully.

A few years ago I walked through our neighborhood alone as dusk turned to night, and holiday lights began to flicker. As I passed one particular house, I gasped. Through the clear glass door I saw a glow that literally stopped me in my tracks. The beautifully appointed staircase with its carefully wrapped greenery, red bows, and glowing white candles took my breath away. As holiday decorations go, I suppose it was actually somewhat simple, but it was so lovely that my thoughts immediately lifted to Jesus. I stood on the sidewalk worshipping the most beautiful One of all. The King who willingly left heaven’s splendor with one goal—my redemption.

*Jesus, You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Thank You for emptying Yourself of the splendor of heaven to walk among us on this earth and pay the redemption price. I declare You worthy of worship and glory and praise and splendor. You are my Loving Savior. Please lead my Christmas season. Help me feel free to worship with as much—or little—pomp as this year calls up within me. Let each holiday action remind me of You. Fill my home with peace and worship.*



*Week One ~ Christmas Memories*

## **Day 2: Christmas Memories**

*"THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED."*

*~ Matthew 4:16 NASB*

*People sitting out their lives in the dark*

*saw a huge light;*

*Sitting in that dark, dark country of death,*

*they watched the sun come up.*

*~ Matthew 4:16, MSG*

My memories of the Christmas seasons of my childhood are as though from a black and white TV. Not because of the nostalgic beauty, but because of the depression that shrouded my home. Most of my growing up years were spent in northeastern Oklahoma. Too far south to have much snow, winters are often a cold, damp mess. Though those foothills of the Ozark Mountains are gloriously green as they roll along in spring and early summer, winter is different. In my memory the clouds descended a day or two after Thanksgiving and didn't lift until Easter. Fog often shrouded the woods near my home, and when it burned off, the sky was still gray and dull. To see blue or feel the warmth of a winter sun was rare. There aren't many evergreens, so the deciduous trees reached with tired gray limbs to a murky sky. The fields were dull and barren.

The worst time of all was Christmas break.

There was nothing to celebrate.

Along with the sense of having little to look forward to while my friends chatted about their plans was the underlying hurt from a friend who told me I belonged to a



cult because I didn't celebrate Christ's birth. I couldn't understand why she missed how deeply I loved Jesus. I recoiled from the judgment.

My parents tried to ease our holiday pain, buying us little gifts over the winter break, calling them "Lovemas" presents. They didn't want us to return to school in January without having received a gift, but there was no real celebration. Ironically my parents and I loved old classics, like "White Christmas," as well as the sentimental flicks of family gatherings that are popular during that season. But there were no bright red stockings at my house and no traditional meals. Not at Christmas.

I have at least one good Christmas season memory. When I was six or seven, my family lived in a church basement in Wichita, and we planned a trip to Oklahoma. I couldn't wait to see my grandparents! Before we left my mom had a list of chores for us to complete, but she made it a game. Each time we did a chore we found a little gift hidden away! It was such fun! I am not sure, but I think that is when I was given Happy, my favorite doll. (As I matured, I tried repeatedly to call her something more reasonable—like Megan or Abby, but try as I might I could not change it. My little girl heart was so full of delight with her that I named her the first word that came to me, and that doll could never be anyone but Happy.)

I still remember running to my mom when I didn't find a gift as I vacuumed my room. Her eyes twinkled as she asked if I'd cleaned beneath my bed. Dad quickly put together the pogo stick I found there, and my brother and I spent many happy hours bouncing on those pogo sticks on the concrete floors of the church basement's fellowship hall. When we headed to my grandparents' house, we made a stop at my uncle's place. I think that was when my aunt gave me the Raggedy Ann doll who went everywhere with me from that day forward. That doll hid with me in the bathroom when my parents fought and mom started throwing things. She was in my sleeping bag in high school on band trips, and she moved into the college dorms with me. Today she sits on a lamp stand in the bedroom Jerry and I share.

We moved back to Oklahoma soon after that Christmas trip. I remember the delight when, in our house on Boone Street, my parents gave me a gaily wrapped package with a new red plaid flannel nightgown in it. I think that was the year my brother and I decorated the avocado tree. It's likely there are more happy memories, and as I write I am glad to have some good back from the darkness. But as I matured each Christmas season became more dreary, or I maybe I just remember it that way.

My dad's family was Baptist, and that grandmother loved Christmas. But I never felt I really knew her. There was a strain between her and my mom, and she was quite elderly and sick. On top of that she couldn't understand my parents' faith journey. Most

of what I remember about visiting my grandmother is a dusty, dimly lit home and the sense that she preferred my brother to me. But the one thing I was eager to see at her house was Christmas candy. She kept colorful ribbon candy in a dish in the living room.

Stress cloaked the conversation each year about whether or not to go to her house on Christmas. Sometimes we did. It was an awkward affair with aunts and uncles and cousins mostly unknown to me. I knew the names—at least most of them—but with a few exceptions I had no real relationship. We were the youngest grandchildren, and the first cousins were all grown up. They were kind, but nobody seemed to know what to do with us. Should we be given presents? One thoughtful aunt always saw to it that my brother and I got a paint by number set, and I treasured those. But even at a young age I felt the tension my family's presence brought to their gatherings.

When my grandmother died, Dad wept as he preached her funeral and talked about her love of Christmas. He described a delight I'd never experienced. I felt cheated. Again. I didn't understand Christmas, and I hadn't understood my grandmother. I longed to make sense of both. My dad said she loved Jesus. How could I reconcile her love of Jesus with the big red Santa that was always on her roof? (Santa was taboo in our household. I think the only thing worse than Santa was a Christmas tree.) Had something beautiful and magical been denied me, or had my grandmother died embracing a bunch of lies?

I learned to dread Christmas break, especially once we were a little older and living on the farm. My mom was a teacher and had the holidays off with us, but there was no bustle of excitement. In fact I learned the one thing I could probably count on at Christmas was that my mom would get depressed. Very likely she and dad would have a huge fight. Sometimes I would awaken in the night to her car pulling out of the driveway, wondering if she would come home. Our dimly lit little farm house didn't seem cheerful with a cozy glow of the wood stove. It seemed dark and sad.

My parents' anniversary was December 28th. Usually that day was hellacious. Sometimes it included screaming and breaking things. The date was often blamed as the root of my mom's pain. She seemed to believe that if she hadn't married my dad, her life would be grand instead of dreary.

New Year's Eve was a welcome relief. We were finally past those awful weeks, and there was something to look forward to. Usually we made the drive literally over the river and through the woods to my uncle's house. We celebrated with my cousins. The highlights were games ("High Five" was always my favorite) and shooting fireworks. My brother loved to light them. I preferred to watch. Oh how I loved the

Roman candles, but how I worried when my cousin would hold them in his hand! I never did learn to like the obnoxious black cat firecrackers, but even their jarring boom was *alive*.

### Celebration!

I was a mother myself when I finally connected my December blues to the fact that the last two dreary weeks of December were consistently the worst two weeks of the year in my childhood home. I must have been in my early thirties. I strolled through a Christian bookstore, feeling melancholy, when I suddenly realized it was the 28th. I flashed back to my parents' sadness and anger. It was then I determined to break the cycle. I wish I had an immediate success story, but I don't.

As I mentioned yesterday, Jerry's and my journey to celebrate has been two steps forward and one step back. Lies that keep us in bondage and limit our joyful freedom are often many-armed. As I think about this situation, I remember the twisty weed I wrote about at the beginning of *Soul Scents: Flourish*. One weedy arm that reaches from the lie-root within me is the cycle of sadness that began in childhood. Another is the legalism that twisted about my heart, squeezing out freedom in my Christmas worship. I'm sure my dear husband has his own twisty weeds, squeezing out freedom in his life too.

Every year from January until the end of November, my husband and I enjoyed a harmonious, happy marriage—until the week after Thanksgiving. Then it was struggle and compromise, arguments and silence. Unwittingly, each December I carried on the family discord I'd grown up with, only now, as a married adult, it was around my desire to celebrate. The celebrant within me couldn't be silenced, and my husband is an authentic, principled man. He couldn't celebrate something he couldn't understand.

Thankfully, the December discord was simply that. We tried not to personally attack each other. We didn't question our marriage. (Praise God, even in disagreements we seek to look each other in the eyes and love.) I think our deep love and desire not to hurt the other actually made our holiday disagreements more painful because if he stood firm, the win only meant he grieved my disappointment. If I "won," it came at the cost of his pain, and I grieve when he experiences pain.

Each year I forged a little path toward celebration. Some things Jerry could embrace; others made him withdraw. I couldn't let go of my need to celebrate. He couldn't understand the need to do so. He tried. For my sake. We grieved over what to do for our children. We created little family traditions, but there was always an underlying stress. It was a push-pull, forward and back process. What seemed to be okay one year was frowned upon for the next several. Often my choices and the choices

of the children became quiet. Covert. It hurt him. It hurt us. Our little family simply could not agree on what Christmas should be. Every choice we made came at a cost to one of us—and surely the process came at a cost to our children who felt the underlying tension.

As is life, there is good along with the struggle, some of which grew out of my mom's desire to give good all those years ago. The one thing Jerry and I agreed to was giving the children something to look forward to. Creating a unique twist on the game my mom did that year in Wichita, we embraced a yearly treasure hunt. I'd hide little gifts throughout the house and write rhymes offering clues to where they could be found. It was great fun and became a tradition the children could count on. Not yet free to decorate for Christmas, we began a first snow tradition and spent hours drinking hot chocolate and cutting out snowflakes, which we hung in the windows and left there until spring made them unwelcome. Eventually Jerry and I agreed it was okay to hang twinkle lights. (Oh how I love twinkle lights!) "After all," I told Jerry, "Jesus is the Light of the World." These events brought family connectedness and great joy to all of us. I've grieved my inability to give my children more Christmas memories of joy and worship, but I am grateful for what we did create together.

Still, no matter what we did, it was never enough for me. I understand now it is because no matter how many traditions I created, decorations I hung, or Advent devotions I read, I never felt completely *free*. Sometimes it takes years, not weeks or months, for God to unwind the twisty weed so we walk in the fullness of the freedom He won at the cross.

It's cathartic to me to process my Christmas wound. I believe it will aid in my quest for complete healing in a place that has healed tiny-bit-by-tiny-bit, two-steps-forward-one-step-back for years.

But I don't only share for my healing.

We've all heard the statistics of suicide and destruction that rise around the holidays. Most of us have a Christmas wound or two. I hope yours are not as deep as mine. Even if they are deeper, isn't it time to heal? Isn't it time to break cycles of oppression and embrace the right to worship in joy and freedom? What if we invite Jesus to shine His light into our darkness this holiday season? What if we declare this day Christmas Day, fully His, and give Him permission to show us how to celebrate, living beyond the wounding?

*Oh Sweet Jesus, You are the Light of the World and the Light of my life. You showed me the path of salvation, taking me from the captivity of sin and death and carrying me to the kingdom where*

*You reign with the Father. You embrace me as Your very own family. Now that I am safe in community with You, I long for the wounds of darkness I've pushed down within myself to be exposed to Your healing light. I don't know how to heal on my own. I don't know how to break the cycles of oppression. But I ask You to do it. Heal the places within that hurt during the holidays. I give You permission to bring up specific memories, even if they grieve me. I trust You will know what to do with them. You will show me how to respond so I can heal. Where my thinking has been skewed by the enemy's wounds and lies, I give You permission to untangle my thought processes and show me truth. Shine Your Light into my darkness. I know You've eagerly awaited my permission to walk with me into more freedom. I trust You.*



*Week One ~ Christmas Memories*

**Day 3: Music**

*Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; celebrate his lovely name with music.*

*~ Psalm 135:3 NLT*

I love Christmas music. I love the deep meaning of its hymns. I love the imagination of its fanciful carols. I love its familiarity, and I love the new songs that break into the season and claim their place until they are sung enough years in a row to become a piece of someone's Christmas memories.

I love the "Hallelujah Chorus" and the "Nutcracker Suite." I love the lullabies and the madrigal. I love "Silver Bells" and Bing Crosby's crooning. I love "Mary, Did You Know."

I love song, and I especially love singing Christmas music.

I hadn't thought of it until today, but maybe I love it so much because it was the one part of Christmas celebration that could never be denied me. It slipped over the radio in a moving car, rang out in the grocery stores, and glory of glories, every school choir had a Christmas performance. Oh hallelujah! My parents believed that singing in choir developed talents I could use in church for Jesus, and I never complained about getting to sing.

Here I could give myself over to worship as we sang Christmas music about Jesus (it was okay back then to at least include a song or two that talked about His birth). Here I could also embrace the fun of the season. Because Rudolph and Santa were all connected to the stuff my family said was sinful, I sang those songs with a bit of guilt and a lot of hidden delight. But I freely belted out "Frosty the Snowman" and "Let It Snow" and "Winter Wonderland." They were technically called Christmas carols, but I could sing with no guilt for they didn't talk of Christmas!

When my then-boyfriend now-husband proposed to me in the snow beside Lake Tahoe on December 31, 1988, how that childlike wonder grabbed hold of the romance of

the moment! A snowman populated the shore where we sat gazing over the water, and I dubbed him “Parson Brown.” I still sing “Winter Wonderland” with a joy bubble in my heart and a gaze that longs to catch my dear husband’s attention, hoping he’ll remember and celebrate with me.

I was delighted when my brother-in-law, who was then worship pastor in a church in the denomination of my childhood, decided our congregation shouldn’t be denied the joy of celebrating Christ’s birth. Maybe he was on his own journey to freedom. I don’t know. I never asked him. But he began a tradition of singing the beautiful songs of Jesus’ birth in October, to coincide with the church’s belief about when Jesus was actually born. You should have heard all of us belting out Christmas carols! What joy! What freedom!

When we first left the church of our childhood years ago, it was music that drew us to a new church home. Soon I was singing not only in the choir but also in a small group. And guess what that small group did at Christmas? We sang, of course! Making stops in the malls and on stages of small-town festivals, my holiday season was filled with the celebration of music. There was not yet freedom to worship in my own home, my three-year-old would not get her Christmas tree, much less a nativity story on the twenty-fifth, but God in His goodness provided my heart with celebration.

When Sarah was a teen, I taught a high school girl’s Bible study class in our homeschool enrichment program. Most years we chose a nursing home where we could offer the gift of music during the holiday season. Each year I sang with a lump in my throat, enjoying those whose eyes lit up as we approached, and grieving those whose light had dimmed. One year we caroled in an Alzheimer’s unit. I’ll never forget what happened. As we walked the floors of this place where many looked at us with vacant gaze, one lady began following us around, singing! I heard whispers among the staff. This dear woman had not spoken for some time, her thoughts too garbled to vocalize, but the songs of Christmas found a way past the barriers in her mind, and she celebrated. Even the disease could not steal the words, rhythms, and melodies of Christmas. For a brief moment Alzheimer’s had no power.

Oh the music of Christmas!

My family and I attend a nondenominational church now, and this is where our family attended its first Christmas Eve service as a unit. I love the roar of celebration there. It is full of fanfare and energy and excitement. Extra services are offered and the auditorium bursts at the seams with each one. Years ago, before my family was amenable to attending a Christmas Eve service, I wanted to visit one. I chuckle at the memory because the one person who would go with me was my dear Jewish neighbor,

Bernice. Before her death she made peace with Jesus, choosing to believe He was the Messiah promised her people, but that year she wasn't sure. She and I searched together, and I chuckle at the memory of the two of us slipping into a service at a nearby Lutheran church. We picked this service simply because it was advertised on their church sign. Here we were, Jew and Christian, elderly and young, two sojourners who hadn't yet made our peace with all this Christmas stuff, but who longed to celebrate. Bernice and I loved Christmas music. The Lord gave Bernice a gift that evening. It turns out an old friend of hers attended the little church we chose. They welcomed Bernice with open arms, and she went home full.

The last December before her death Bernice attended a Christmas Eve service with my family. As we drove to our church where the music is loud enough Jerry wears ear plugs and multiple services overflow with thousands of people, I worried about my dear friend navigating the chaos with her cane. I also feared the volume of worship would overwhelm her. I shouldn't have. People for several rows near us chuckled when she leaned over during a lull in the service and said (well, actually yelled, as those hard of hearing often do), "At least I can hear what's going on in this church!"

God is amazing. That particular year the pastor connected much in the sermon back to the belief system of the Jews. It made for some interesting conversation between Bernice and my husband on the drive home, and I believe our experience that night was a building block in the faith she was beginning to grasp. Oh—and the crowds didn't bother her either. Bernice's neuropathy made her unsteady on her feet, so I held onto her arm as we navigated the swarm of people in the church entryway. (I'd call it a foyer or narthex, but it's just not that kind of church!) "It's like a salmon swimming upstream," I whispered.

Bernice straightened and pulled from my supportive grasp. Holding her head high with a gleam in her eye she responded, "It's like being at the theater in New York!" Oh how good God was to connect her experience at the Christmas Eve service back to her beloved New York City, filling her with the excitement of her younger years.

Nowadays I work part-time as a staff singer in a nearby Lutheran church. Growing up in a denomination that gave no credence to a traditional church calendar, I'm especially grateful for the opportunity to delight in all the seasons of worship denied me as a child. I love the changing of the decorations in the sanctuary, the intentional shifts in the liturgy, and the music.

Oh the music!



As I reflect on my struggle to celebrate Jesus at Christmas, I am filled with gratitude that He gave me song! This part of seasonal worship could not be denied me. Hallelujah! Whether wearing jeans or a choir robe, I was born to celebrate the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the car, on a stage, or in my shower at home, I sing. Sent to this earth by a joyful God who joyfully responds to joyful worship, He Himself filled the sky with angels proclaiming the wonder of Christ's birth.

Oh sweet friend, there is no greater gift given us than the gift of Jesus.

Do you feel it? The lifting of your heart to worship?

Let's be real, I know at least some of you are rolling your eyes right now, already sick of Christmas music even though it is barely past Thanksgiving. But may I ask you to embrace the joy of it? The celebration? The fact that songs about our Lord are actually playing in stores and on radios where He is typically excluded?

When you hear a carol can you celebrate for me—with me—and every little child whose longing to celebrate his or her King has been stifled? Can you sing with the Alzheimer's patient who, for a brief moment, remembers and connects with her surroundings? Would you remember those who've not yet met our Lord, but who are drawn to the music of the season? And most of all, would you give your heart permission to celebrate—to worship the Jesus of the nativity—even if your mind is numbed by the repetition of the season?

*Thank You, God, for the gift of music! For every truth singing out over the earth in this season. For every chuckle of delight or sigh of a romantic heart at the seasonal renditions of imagination or romance. Replace my irritation with celebration. The mind-numbing repetition with an ability to claim the music and worship. I may not love every song I hear, but I love You!*



*Week One ~ Christmas Memories*

**Day 4: Struggling to Worship**

*"I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem!"*

*~ Luke 2:10–11 TLB*

My struggle to learn how to worship Christ at Christmas was, and is, intense. As I've mentioned, Jerry's has been even more difficult. As I changed over a period of years, embracing the longing to celebrate the Jesus in this season, Jerry didn't understand my desires. It was very hard for me—and him. As I mentioned a few days ago, years passed in this way, my pain exacerbated by my longing to give my children celebration, worship, and tradition.

Close to ten years ago God gave a friend of mine a vision that I clung to. As she prayed, she saw my husband, full of joy, standing at the front door with a Christmas tree. As I mentioned earlier, Jerry and I had specific teaching about the evil of the Christmas tree. Over the years I no longer gave credence to this school of thought, but it was harder for Jerry. We'd opened our lives to little samples of the celebration of Christ's birth, but to have a tree was out of the question.

When my friend shared her vision, I said something awesome like, "That'll happen when my husband turns over in his grave." Then a different friend got the same vision a few weeks later. On shaky legs of faith I held onto God's promise through years of pain, believing someday we would celebrate without hindrance. I don't remember how many years passed, probably seven or more, but each Christmastime I wondered, "Could this be the year?"

Those years came and went with no family Christmas celebration at the Moldenhauer house.

I was offered my first traditional book contract. It was for a Christmas story. "What do you think, honey?" I asked.

“That’s your thing, not mine.”

Thanks to this gift from God’s hand, I wrote “You’re a Charmer, Mr. Grinch,”\* in freedom, exploring and enjoying the traditions, celebration, and worship I longed to live.

Then the children grew and began moving out to find their own lives. Oh the tears I cried! How I had longed to create Christmas tradition and memories before they were gone! How I’d longed to express my creativity by weaving worship and celebration of Jesus into the Christmas season! How I craved the freedom to create beauty, atmosphere, and excitement.

But the opportunity passed me by.

Thrust into the throes of empty nest with only the youngest son still living at home, I found it difficult to embrace the nativity when December arrived. In recent years I had enjoyed private worship with Advent candles and devotionals, just Jesus and me. For many years, with Jerry’s permission if not quite his blessing, the kids and I hung twinkle lights and put out a nativity, but that year I struggled to open my Advent devotional and left my beloved twinkle lights in the closet.

A trusted friend admonished. “Don’t let your joy be stolen!”

But I had no heart for it. Struggling to find the desire to celebrate or even eke out a little worship, I pulled out the Advent candles and the Advent devotional and asked God to meet me there. He was worthy of worship and celebration even if I felt devoid of it.

There is more to this story—I’ll tell you all about it another day—but I don’t want to rush past the grace of those years of unanswered longing. When we choose to celebrate the Lord, even from a place emptiness, He meets us there. Sometimes the clouds of pain clear away enough to easily find joyful worship; sometimes the burden continues to crush. But it isn’t the ease of life or the happy times we worship. We celebrate the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is worthy of worship even when our hearts are sad. He is good even when life feels bad.

I can’t believe I almost didn’t pull out the twinkle lights that Christmas! But the Lord called to me through my son Sam. As I prayed for grace to embrace the nativity, my youngest, then seventeen, asked if we could hang the cross in the upper window. It was one of the few things we’d done, like clockwork, most of the years of his life. His choice to celebrate fueled my own. We cranked Christmas music (despite the fact that he was tired of it; after all, he listened to it all day at work), and he helped me decorate. As I asked the Lord for the ability to celebrate Him, my heart opened to worship.

Maybe this season you carry your own burden. To celebrate Christmas feels impossible. May I encourage you to pour out your pain before a loving Jesus who understands? Part of the message of the nativity is that Jesus left the splendor of heaven and walked among us experiencing the pain of our world. He is Emmanuel, the One who is God *with* us. Scripture says He is also now the High Priest who sympathizes with our weakness and the loving King who reigns on high. We can declare Him good, no matter our emotions, and He is faithful to meet us where we are. Comforting. Showering us with His goodness, opening our eyes and hearts to unexpected mercies.

*Precious Jesus, You are worthy of worship regardless of the state of my emotions or the disappointments of my life. Take my pain. My unmet longings. My confusion. Replace these things with Your love. Your grace. Your hope. Your clarity. I do believe You are with me always. I have the consolation that You are Emmanuel, God with me. I know You never, ever forsake me. You never ever give up on Your good plan for me. Even when I can't see a way out of my disappointments, You are working for my good. Thank You for humbling Yourself and coming to this earth so we can share intimacy. Open my heart to worship. To celebrate.*

*\*You're a Charmer, Mr. Grinch* is now the first book in Paula's new Christmas novella series, *Tinseled Tidings*. You can enjoy it, and the next two stories, *The Joy Scrooge* and *Fruitcake Fallout*, on Kindle, or you can get all three in the paperback collection, *Tinseled Tidings* (Vol. 1).



*Week One ~ Christmas Memories*

## **Day 5: A Longing Fulfilled**

*O Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven and earth. You are the God who keeps his kind promises to all those who obey you and who are anxious to do your will.*

*~ 2 Chronicles 6:14 TLB*

Funny things happen.

Yesterday I told you about my friend's vision of my husband bringing home a Christmas tree and how for many years this promise went unfulfilled. Each year we tried to figure out Christmas, and over time we fostered some good family times to look forward to during those last two weeks of December, but still I felt stifled, like the opportunity to celebrate in freedom during my children's formative years had passed me by. Here is the rest of the story.

Strange occurrences marked the days after Sam and I hung the cross in the upper window that year, and I prayed God would help me worship. It started when my daughter, Sarah, and her husband, David, asked if they could move in for a few months between apartments. My first response was to ask if they could wait until January. With the two oldest boys on break from college over the holidays, I simply didn't know where to put everyone! But the reality was Sarah and David's lease was up in November, and the boys would return home soon after. I finally shrugged off the worries about wall-to-wall stuff and the reality that there wouldn't be enough beds. I told Jerry, "We'll just pile up like puppies and enjoy the family being together."

My husband just grinned at me. He loves being surrounded by his children.

The beauty of the season began to seep into me. Jerry took me on a date and seemed to actually enjoy the twinkle lights lining the river pathway where we walked. I liked having Sarah and David home for the little traditions of Sarah's childhood. Cutting snowflakes out together was fun. David and Seth's girlfriend, Amanda, created

exotic designs unlike those our original family had made. We hung them in the window, commenting on the unique artistry of each person.

Then Jerry began tossing and turning at night. We typically enjoy open communication, easily sharing our concerns with each other, but when I asked him if something was wrong that we could pray about together his no was sharp. Immediately, he softened his tone, explaining that at some point we would talk about what was bothering him, but that he needed some space to process.

Little did I know he was praying intently about God's perspective on Christmas and its traditions.

One day my sweet husband asked, "Honey, has it hurt you that we haven't celebrated Christmas like you wanted?"

"You don't know?" Oh how I fought to keep sarcasm out of my voice!

"I know it's not been what you wanted, but has it hurt you? I mean *deeply* hurt you."

My tears answered his question.

"Are there ways you haven't felt freedom to celebrate and worship the way you want?"

After the years and all of the discussions I couldn't believe he was even asking.

"What specifically?"

Too vulnerable with a pain carried for too many years, I offered a vague answer and excused myself from the conversation. Then I hid and prayed through my emotions. The issue of how to celebrate Christmas had blocked our intimacy for years. I'd felt so alone. I was disappointed in myself for shutting down now that he was asking questions and trying to understand. Later that night when we were alone in bed, I apologized for how I handled the conversation and told Jerry I would answer any question he wanted to ask. I didn't want anything to come between us and the intimacy we desired.

"It's okay, honey." He snuggled up to me, comforting me with his presence. "I got my answer."

What I didn't know then was how gently God was revealing His heart and mine to my husband.

Our home burst at the seams with the boys home for winter break and Sarah and David's belongings overflowing from their bedroom into our living room and garage. Seth and Stephen didn't seem to mind sleeping on the couch. It was a rare treat, all of us being together. My earlier pain around our Christmas celebration was not completely gone, but it was lifting.

Then a friend shared how she, too, fought to find celebration within herself. Her family was going through financial hardship, and their move away from extended family added loneliness on top of the lack of money for Christmas. God orchestrated some really cool things, which included the generosity of my husband and several friends. The family was given a Christmas tree, and the rest of us pitched in to provide gift cards and presents. My joy was off the charts! How good God was to allow us to be a part of an abundant surprise for our friends. I praised and thanked Him for the ability to bless when for so many years we were unable to do so. I felt Him in that moment. I felt His joy, His great delight in blessing me and blessing them.

I've rarely felt that completely happy.

On December 20th, as I wrapped a mound of gifts for this precious family, my husband disappeared. It felt strange, and I worried. Then another friend shared her pain with me. My heart again felt heavy. Afraid of whatever prompted my husband to leave the house without telling me and afraid all the gifts for our friends had overloaded him with too much Christmas, old defense mechanisms kicked in. I felt my heart shutting down from my husband. The joy and delight of delivering gifts to my friends drained away. I cried out to God as I drove to their house.

I sensed the Lord telling me to live my joy and to refuse to let it be stolen. I fought down the fear of a Christmas chasm between Jerry and me and called his cell as I drove. When I asked where he was he gave a vague answer. I chose to be real with him about what I was feeling and asked him to pray that I could be joyful as I delivered the gifts to our friends. My husband, the same man who used to get upset if we bought someone a Christmas gift, encouraged me to delight in the opportunity to bless.

The time with my friend was glorious. I'll admit to a secret delight at being able to place gifts under a tree. Heck! I felt like Santa Claus! Their home had a new energy as evidence of the love of their new community poured out in gift after gift placed beneath a tree. The youngest of their five children pranced around the house, pulling out family mementos and asking her mom where they should be placed. In joy I left them to their decorating and drove home with a light heart.

Oh, God is *good*!

My husband arrived home shortly after I did. He asked the boys to unload the van and bring the contents inside. Bewildered expressions marked their faces as they carried in their first Christmas tree and two boxes of lights. Jerry disappeared into his office, still processing his choice to bring us a tree.

Thankfully David was home because he actually knew how to set up a tree, something the rest of us had never done. He couldn't wait to surprise Sarah, whose

employment at the church meant she was working that day. It was dark when Sarah texted her husband saying she was almost home. He asked us to turn out the lights on the tree and in the living room, so there would be no hint through the picture window of the surprise awaiting her. When she arrived, I asked her if she'd do us a favor and please plug in the lights.

"We have a Christmas tree?" She squealed.

Then, "We have a Christmas tree! We have a Christmas tree!" The little three-year-old finally had her dream after twenty years of waiting.

"Dad, do you know, do you know about the promise of the tree?" she asked. "I prayed it would be this year. While I was home."

As Sarah and I told Jerry about the promise, I realized it was no mistake that our family home had been so overrun by all of our adult children. Our Lord orchestrated it all. Though I hadn't been allowed to create "Christmas" for them growing up, the Lord sent everyone home for our first Christmas tree.

That night after my husband and Sarah and David had gone to bed, I sat on the couch, enjoying the tree. All three of those grown-up boys slipped into the living room and sprawled their six foot frames across the carpet next to it. In the hush of night, with the twinkling lights punctuating our joy, we shared about the wonder of our first tree.

The story of why my husband bought the tree that year is too long for today's devotional, and I promise to share more next week. But I have a point today, not just a poignant story.

We serve a God who is faithful to His promises.

He hears our heart cry.

He loves to give us good gifts.

There were many Christmas seasons, including that early December of 2014, I felt like I could have written Job's words from *The Message*, "Where's the strength to keep my hopes up? What future do I have to keep me going? Do you think I have nerves of steel? Do you think I'm made of iron? Do you think I can pull myself up by my bootstraps? Why, I don't even have any boots!" (Job 6:11-13).

But God offered hope in that year as He had in the others. Today I am not groaning as Job did. My heart shouts out in praise and joy, sounding more like the words in Romans, "We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold



everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!" (Romans 5:3–5, MSG).

Do you have a long unfulfilled desire, my friend? A longing beyond your control? If you are confident it is something the Lord has promised you, then hang on. Don't give up.

He always keeps His word.

*God, You are the giver of good gifts. Thank You for every gift You've given me and for every gift yet to come. Where I feel despair, please flood me with hope. If I have desires not of You, then please refine my heart so I can long for only the good You already want to give. If I have unfulfilled desires that are within Your plan, give me confidence that You will work in Your time. I know You are not capricious. You don't dangle hope to snatch it away. You give promises to sustain. Then You keep Your promises.*



## Week One Response

How do your Christmas memories affect your ability to worship Christ this Advent season? How do they affect your ability to rest in the hope that never disappoints?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice or general writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.



## **Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration**



## Second Sunday of Advent

### **Light:**

Two purple candles

### **Ponder:**

*Peace*

How are your emotions today? Peaceful? Restless? Chaotic?

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He told His disciples that He gives a different kind of peace than the world gives. Paul called it the peace that surpasses understanding and said this peace guards our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7).

Jesus' coming and giving Himself on the cross made peace between us and the Father. Nothing. No one. Can take away this peace. It is a gift. Oh, we can turn from peace, but it never goes away. It is there, deep inside, waiting to be recognized once again.

Peace is what God wanted. Reconciliation with a creation whose rebellion had separated them from His love.

Pause to accept the truth that there is complete peace between you and God thanks to Jesus coming to earth. No matter your success or failures, faults or virtues, good choices or bad, you walk in peace with your Creator. He accepts you. He loves you. He likes you.

He also works within you to restore peace today in whatever place restlessness or worry tries to steal it away. He is God. His love is so deep He came to earth to give us the gift of peace, even when it meant great sacrifice on His part. He is bigger than the questions, the wounds, the money issues, the broken relationships, the overwhelming task list. Into each concern He speaks, "Peace. Be still."

**Pray:**

You are my peace. Thank You for seeing and working in every situation that concerns me. Thank You for peace in our relationship, a peace Jesus brought that nothing can take away. Help me to turn *from* stress and worry and turn *to* peace. Your peace. You are good, and You are in control. My heart rests in You. My heart embraces peace because You are peace, and You have given peace to me.

**Worship:**

Listen to or sing one of the following carols: *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, *Let There Be Peace on Earth*, or *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*.



*Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration*

**Day 1: The Tree**

*"But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,  
whose confidence is in him.*

*They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.*

*It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.*

*It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit."*

*~ Jeremiah 17:7-8 NIV*

The happy ending to last week's stories writes like a Hallmark Christmas movie, and while it is a glorious, joyous memory, the reality of the experience wasn't quite so simple. It was a huge challenge for my husband to make the choice to bring home a Christmas tree. The teachings that held him back ran deep. He bought the tree out of a desire to obey God and a desire to love me well, but the tree's presence in our home made my man uncomfortable. I spent untold hours enjoying its twinkling lights and crisp, fresh fragrance, but for a while my husband avoided the room where it was. He acted in obedience and love, but the choice went against every fiber of his being. It was hard for him to get used to the foreign object in his home, one he'd vowed would never be there.

Jerry made the choice to buy the tree after praying for many days about a note he'd received from a friend. It encouraged him to buy a Christmas tree, by sharing the following thoughts:

*"The tree is Mine," says the Lord. "It is beauty. It represents how I am forever green, even when life is full of snowstorms and cold winds. When stripped of its leaves it represents the foundation of the cross. And when it produces pinecones*

it represents newness. . . . It will be a healing tree and a place that marks a new beginning for you. When you look at it you will be reminded that My promises are true. . . . The pagans and the world lay no claim on it for My Word says, ‘Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time’” (Ecclesiastes 1:10, NIV).

I love that my husband was willing to ponder our friend’s message. I love that he went before the Lord and spent the nights tossing and turning and seeking confirmation that those words were really from his God. I love that once Jerry was convinced God spoke to him, my dear husband acted in obedience, doing something completely foreign to his upbringing, something he never expected to do.

We printed out the words about the tree and framed them. It’s important to Jerry that the children and I understand why he made the choice to bring the tree into our home. He did it out of obedience because the Lord showed him that before there was even a Christmas to celebrate, the evergreen tree was created to bring its Creator glory. It stands beautiful and tall as a metaphor of God.

I sense a whisper inside that it is also a metaphor of what He does in us. As God remakes us into the image of Jesus, He gives us the strength to stand forever green—alive—even when our life is invaded by cold wind and storm—or heat and drought as today’s Scripture talks about. Sometimes we feel stripped of our beauty, scarred, and yet in all things He works to make us into a symbol of hope and redemption. We experience rebirth in salvation and rebirth as we are healed. He produces new things, good fruit, from our lives.

I hope you enjoy your Christmas tree as deeply as I enjoy mine. As we gaze upon its beauty this year, may it remind us of God’s creative, redemptive heart. May we worship our God as One who is forever green, vibrant, verdant, and alive in every storm, the One who helps us choose life in our storms! Even as our hearts lift in wonder of the incarnation, when we look upon our Christmas tree, may we also see it as a reminder of His greatest act of love—the willingness to sacrifice Himself upon that cross, so we can be made anew!

*Oh, Lord, how beautiful You are! Nothing in all creation can be stolen from You, debased to be less than it is. Your creation, whether an evergreen tree or a person is beautiful and right, pointing all of creation back to the wonder of who You are. You are forever green no matter the struggles of this world. Help me to be alive, too, not deadened by the storms I’ve endured, but living awake—flourishing. Verdant! You came to earth anticipating the cross. Your act of sacrifice purchased me for Yourself, so I can live in the fullness of who You meant me to be. No*

*one. Nothing. Not in this world or the unseen realms. There is nothing in heaven or earth that can debase me or put a godless mark upon me or take away my beauty. Your act on Golgotha's tree promises I am new. Thank You, Jesus for coming for me. As I gaze upon the gaily lit Christmas trees this year, remind me of Your strength and the strength You give me. Remind me that even when I feel stripped, You create a vessel of honor. Remind me that You make all things new. Help me to stand tall gazing at Your beauty, and to believe that You see beauty when You look upon me.*





*Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration*

## **Day 2: Fragrance of Christmas**

*But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ.*

*~ 2 Corinthians 2: 14–15 NASB*

I didn't know Christmas had this fragrance. I breathe deeply, filling my nostrils with the clean, fresh scent of the evergreen tree. The aroma is like God's favor washing over me. In it I smell His faithfulness. His kindness. His attention to detail.

I pause, away from the busyness, away from the bustle and noise. Seeking. Seeking Him.

"Thank you," I whisper. "Thank you for what you have done and will do in my husband and in all of us. For being the One who fights for me, my family, and our hearts."

He whispers, "I am the First Gift Giver. I am the ultimate Gift Giver."

The day outside is a wintry gray, but my tree twinkles, full of light. The dimness outside the picture window only makes the lights prettier. I climb into the recliner gifted to us when Bernice passed away, the recliner that replaces the big blue one where I rocked my children and sought my Savior year after year. Pulling my special blanket around me I snuggle in, staring at the twinkle lights, inhaling the scent of Christmas.

"My Father is the Gardener."

I grab my journal and listen, ink flowing across the page, recording the sweet Jesus whispers.

"My Father does great works of beauty in the human soul. I treasure the garden of the hearts of My people. When you let My Spirit cultivate a dwelling place for Me, you prepare a fragrant offering."

I breathe deeply again, inhaling the aroma of this gift, this tree.

I watch the snow fall and think about Jesus.

How does He smell? Does Jesus have a manly, clean scent like that of my tree?  
Spicy like the cinnamon of my holiday baking? Or maybe his scent is hearty and  
tantalizing like homemade bread.

I may not know His exact smell, but I believe all these lovely aromas, like of all of  
creation, point to Him.

He is nourishing like bread.

Fun and a bit feisty like cinnamon.

Strong and clean like the fragrance of my Christmas tree.

My tree.

This gift of God, given through the willing hands of the man who loves me, is  
forever a reminder of the God who keeps His promises, the God who is forever green,  
strong and vibrant through storms, always producing something new in this world.

In my family.

In me.

And you.

And *through* all of us.

This Gift-giver is the God who gave His very self so we could be intimate friends  
with Him.

Friends close enough to catch a whiff of His fragrance.

My mind wanders to the Song of Songs, a love story I've taken for my own. I am  
the beloved of the Bridegroom.

We who love Jesus *are* His treasured bride.

His voice leaps from the pages of my Bible:

"I went to my garden, dear friend, best lover!

breathed the sweet fragrance.

I ate the fruit and honey,

I drank the nectar and wine.

Celebrate with me, friends!

Raise your glasses—"To life! To love!"

(Song of Solomon 5:1, MSG).

*Precious Jesus, You are altogether lovely. You smell good. You are good. The garden of my heart  
is Yours. Breathe in the fragrance of my love, the garden love You planted to be a sweet aroma to  
Yourself. How I love You! I celebrate You—Your entrance to this world as a baby, Your offering  
upon the cross, Your dwelling within me. But most of all I celebrate our friendship. Our love.*

*Help me inhale Your clean, fresh fragrance every day. As we hang out together, make me so much like You that as I pass others a whiff of Your clean fragrance trails after me.*



*Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration*

### **Day 3: Broken and Fragrant**

*He took the punishment, and that made us whole.*

*Through his bruises we get healed.*

*~ Isaiah 53:5, MSG*

I don't know much about Christmas trees. As I prepare to release this book, pre-Christmas, in 2016, I've owned only two. Both were breathtaking in their beauty. Both awakened worship within me. Both gave me hours and hours of joy.

But they smelled different.

The first one, the one Jerry chose for our family, was much more fragrant.

I learned that particular kind of Christmas tree is shaped by the blade. Its perfect triangular shape comes because it was cut, refined, prepared for its life purpose.

*Oh my.*

*Sweet Jesus.*

So often the sweet aroma comes in the breaking.

As King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Your majesty fills worlds seen and unseen.

Yet . . .

It is Your very crushing that sends forth the sweet, clean scent.

Yours.

And mine.

He was looked down on and passed over,

a man who suffered, who knew pain firsthand.

One look at him and people turned away.

We looked down on him, thought he was scum.

But the fact is, it was our pains he carried—

our disfigurements, all the things wrong with us.

We thought he brought it on himself,  
that God was punishing him for his own failures.  
But it was our sins that did that to him,  
that ripped and tore and crushed him—our sins!  
He took the punishment, and that made us whole.  
Through his bruises we get healed. . . .

He was beaten, he was tortured,  
but he didn't say a word.  
Like a lamb taken to be slaughtered  
and like a sheep being sheared,  
he took it all in silence.  
Justice miscarried, and he was led off—  
and did anyone really know what was happening?  
He died without a thought for his own welfare,  
beaten bloody for the sins of my people. . . .

Still, it's what GOD had in mind all along,  
to crush him with pain.  
The plan was that he give himself as an  
offering for sin  
so that he'd see life come from it—life, life,  
and more life.  
And GOD's plan will deeply prosper through him.

Out of that terrible travail of soul,  
he'll see that it's worth it and be glad he did it.  
Through what he experienced, my righteous one, my servant,  
will make many "righteous ones,"  
as he himself carries the burden of their sins (Isaiah 53:3–11, MSG).

*Sweet Jesus, You were crushed to heal my crushing, the bruises and scars put upon me and that I put upon others. You took the punishment and made me whole. Thank You for coming to us.*



*Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration*

**Day 4: Come to the Tree**

*The Word of the Lord is worth more than gold, even more than much fine gold. They are sweeter than honey, even honey straight from the comb.*

*~ Psalm 19:10 NLV*

“Come sit under the Christmas tree with Me.”

Perhaps above all else it was these words of beautiful intimacy, whispered to my friend and shared with me, that made me hunger for whatever it was I missed by not embracing Christmas. They played in my thoughts, year after year, as I wondered what celebrating Christmas truly meant. My friend told me that when she responded to His sweet voice and joined him next to the tree bedecked in twinkle lights, He shared His heart with her as she recorded His thoughts in her journal. She read part of it to me, the part that wasn't quite so intimate. It was early in my journey to believe God speaks to me, before I was able to trust it is *His* voice I listen to.

Oh how I longed to hear and record His voice as she had!

How I longed for Him to be that near, that relational, that sweet to *me*!

My friend and I were traveling when this happened, sharing a hotel room. As I slipped into sleep, I told Jesus how I longed for intimacy with Him. That night I dreamed Jesus stood at the foot of our separate beds. He said that when He saw me, He saw the things He saw in my friend, a beautiful pink heart, one healthy with grace and love, one designed for intimacy. He told me I was loved no less than He loved her, that I was precious to Him too.

Then He held two white rocks in front of me. He said that on each was written a special name, one of them was the name He'd given her, the other the name He'd given me. The white signified how pure and clean we were, washed by His blood and saved by His grace. Each name was intimate. Special. Something He treasured in each of us.

He didn't tell me our names. It's a kingdom secret I look forward to knowing in eternity.

I'd longed for a pretty Christmas tree to decorate as a child, but the longing that grew with my friend's story was at a whole new level. I wanted every ounce of intimacy and worship He had for me.

"Come to the tree," I hear today.

Only in this moment I sense a different tree. It is cleared of branches and needles. It is shaped like a cross.

When I finished my book *Soul Scents: Bloom*, it was late. My family slept quietly, and I delighted in the white space to be alone with God. Instead of going to bed, I slipped into my recliner and pulled out my journal. I wanted to celebrate the moment with Jesus. As I wrote to Him, I sensed Him say, "I celebrate with you! Grab a glass of wine."

I opened the refrigerator. There were two options, but I sensed He wanted me to pour the mead, which is wine made from honey. One time during a prayer gathering the woman praying for me told me that she saw God's anointing upon my words, that what came from me would pour out like honey, sweet and healing for those who listened. Receiving that promise in faith, I poured from that bottle to celebrate with my Jesus. It got a little weird when I felt He asked me to pour two glasses. After all, I didn't really expect Him to drink it, since we are together in spirit rather than flesh. I decided to have our little celebration outside, on the deck I so often thank Him for. I suspected He would ask me to pour the second glass on the ground, like a drink offering before Him. I remembered something about David doing that in Scripture.

What I'm about to share, I share in brief, holding back the words I believe were specifically for me and sharing only those words I believe He speaks to all of us. In reality I was writing in my journal, pausing and praying, never seeing His face. In my spirit I sensed His position in heaven, surrounded by friends who dined with Him there, but I never *saw* anything.

I offer this experience to you with a bit of embellishment, told as a story, in hopes you can read as though you are the heroine. As you digest the following portion, imagine *yourself* as the "I."

Hear His heart for you.

Ponder His request.

Receive His love.

I sit in the night breeze, chilled though it is summer. The dim light illuminates the two glasses of mead on the glass table before me. The flowers I planted in

pots around the deck are colorless shapes, shadows in the darkness, but their beauty is still present in my heart. I scan the sky for stars and moon and watch the tree limbs stir as they reach toward heaven.

The glasses of honey wine call to me. Am I crazy? Did He really ask me to pour two glasses? "It is hard to trust this is Your voice, Jesus, telling me to do this strange thing. But Your voice, Your words are desired by me. More than gold. They are sweeter even than honey. I do want intimacy with You more than I want anything." I stare at the goblets, side-by-side. "Won't You speak and show me what to do with these glasses of mead?"

"Take. Drink. This is our communion. This sharing together."

I sense His voice rising from my heart, I don't hear with my ears, but the words are sweet, so sweet. Just to know He speaks is beyond joy.

"This sharing together is our celebration. Take up your cross and follow Me. Receive from My hand both blessing and sacrifice. Trust Me in each."

"What are we celebrating, Lord?"

"My sacrifice and yours. Your surrender. My victory upon the cross. My resurrection Spirit within you. This moment of victory in your journey. Take up the glass and lift it to heaven!"

I close my eyes and lift my glass, shutting out the deck, the flowers, the night. I hold my glass and listen for His voice, sensing He no longer whispers to my heart, but speaks out loud in heaven, inviting His friends there to listen.

"I toast you. Here is My partner and My bride. She bears many scars, but each is lovely to Me. I see no fault in her. I am highly pleased! Raise your glass, My sister, My bride. Believe in our marriage, our oneness, our unity! You fear failure. Obscurity. Lack of impact. Poverty. How can that be when you are married to the One who is highly exalted above all powers? Raise your glass, for I am King. I have conquered sin and death. I am victorious and joyful and full of delight—and I delight in *you*!"

My voice comes quickly, eager to praise Him, the worthy One who declares me valuable, who claims me as His bride. "Praise You Jesus! King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Praise You for Your kindness and mercy. Your patience and long-suffering. Your sacrifice on my behalf. Your healing unconditional love! Praise You, Jesus!"

Surely they hear me in the heavens. Surely heaven's hosts, seated in His banquet hall, rise from their seats, praise on their lips! "Glory to Jesus! All glory to the Lamb of God who was slain, who bore humanity's iniquities and presents



them whole and clean before the Father! Glory to Jesus! The Lamb slain who rose again! The baby who became Savior of the world!" Their words are an exultant roar. "All praise to King Jesus!"

The moment becomes private again, the banquet hall fading, the deck filling my vision. The two glasses before me.

"Drink now, My daughter." His voice is tender in my ear. "Receive the joy. Receive the anointing. The smaller portion the suffering. The greater the blessing. Both a gift of My hand. Recall this night in the years to come, how I married the suffering and the blessing and called both good. For each brief moment of suffering, you reap great harvest. Others will see the glory of My kingdom because of your surrender to this. Believe. Do not doubt. The mead is sweet, is it not?"

"Yes, Lord."

"The cup of suffering and the cup of blessing are both sweet when poured by My hand. Fear not the future. Trust My sweet presence will abide with you always, even to the end of the age."

I tremble. Is it the cool in the air or the magnitude of my surrender to this difficult request? To drink of not only blessing, but suffering. "Every drop You pour I will drink." My voice barely a whisper. "If You but protect me from all else and hold me in Your sweet presence in sunshine and in rain."

I pick up the first cup, the cup with less wine, and I drink of suffering. "I surrender again to Your plan, Jesus, the sweetness of honey wine upon my lips. Let the meditations of my heart be pure and holy and a blessing to You, my Husband. My Lord. My King."

Reaching for the second cup, the one full of blessing, I drink easily, savoring each sip, awash with His presence.

It's as if He is right there next to me, the breeze like a tender finger brushing my cheek. I can almost see Him place a finger beneath my chin and lift my gaze to His. "Rest My dear one." Oh the sweetness of His voice! "Trust that I am in control and all I ordain will come to pass. I will never leave or forsake you. Where could you flee from My presence? No matter where you go, I am there. I am one with My beloved. We can never be separated. Whether you dwell in joy or sorrow, My presence will comfort and heal you. I hold you to My heart always. My heart beats for you, and I sustain your heart and enable it to beat for Me. Our love affair has just begun. It will grow through the ages of the earth and through the age of eternity. You will know what it means to be truly loved."

Ah, sweet friend. Come to the tree. The rough, scratchy tree with the three nail holes. It is here our Savior taught us how to pick up our cross and walk through suffering to eternal victory.

Ah, precious friend. Come to the tree. The tree that sparkles with tiny lights and joyful declaration just as the sky glistened with the light of the heavenly hosts declaring, "Glory to God in the highest! Peace on whom God's favor rests!" Enjoy the celebration. The blessings! The magical wonder of an eternal King who came as a baby.

Both are the same tree. Blessing and suffering together. Both necessary for the greatest gift of all. Both are the tree of intimacy.

*Lord Jesus, I come.*



*Week Two ~ Trees and Celebration*

## **Day 5: Child of Celebration**

*But whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God, the Creator of all light, and he shines forever without change or shadow.*

*~ James 1:17 TLB*

As recent as last year, even with our Christmas tree by the front window, there was tension around how to celebrate Christmas in our home. As we enter the Christmas season of 2016, the release of this book drawing near, I don't know what this year will hold. For years Jerry and I have hashed out the specifics, me always, always pushing for more Christmas stuff. As if the next decoration or tradition would satisfy my yearning for celebration.

But I've learned something writing these devotionals. For years I thought my deepest wound at Christmas was not being free to create for my children the fullness of the experience I wanted them to have. I thought my hurt centered around whether or not we went to Christmas Eve service or had a Christmas tree or . . . well, you fill in the blank. Each of these decisions to celebrate did bring a measure of joy and freedom, but they are not complete and never will be. This struggle with Christmas celebration is for me only a microcosm of the greater struggle within.

See, I was created to celebrate.

The trappings of Christmas are simply an expression of this need to worship, to sing, to dance. What I really seek is complete freedom to be who I am, to praise my God in abandon, to enjoy every ounce of beauty I can find, without majoring on minors or intense self-evaluation of the rightness of every choice.

From the beginning of my life the enemy tried to steal this identity from me. Children of celebration don't do well with strife, but I was surrounded by it from day one. They need free expression and movement and beauty. As a child, religion created within me a mistrust of the aesthetics. The culture I was raised in didn't give much

credence to the arts. In the early years movies were considered evil. Dance classes a sin. And much of art inappropriate. Beautiful spaces were not particularly appreciated. There was a prevailing attitude in the church of my childhood that poverty was more acceptable than riches. Too much emphasis on outward adornment was also suspect. As a religious culture, there was a scarcity in our ability to celebrate, to embrace the abundance of the gifts God offered us. Christmas was but a tiny piece of a prevailing attitude that found suspect anything that included too much celebration, too much joy, too much beauty—too much abundance of any type.

This morning I read:

“God is not way out there somewhere. He is here! . . . He is the essence of both our inner and outer life. O God, You are here! O Christ, You have come that I might have abundant life. O gracious Spirit, You are as invisible as the wing yet as real as the air that surrounds me, which I inhale to energize my body! You are within and without.

“It is in You, O my God, that I live and move and have my being. You are the environment from which my total life is derived. You are the energy and dynamic of my whole being. Every good and every perfect bestowal is derived from You. The vitality of my spirit, the energy of my emotions, the drive of my disposition, the powerful potential of my mind, the vigor of my body; in fact, every facet of my total, abundant life is a reflection of Your life, Oh Lord, being lived out in me and through me. . . .

“I sense some of His glory in the wonders of the world He made: the flaming sunrises and sunsets that still the soul, the awesome grandeur of the mighty mountain ranges and sweeping plains; the restless roar of ocean waves. . . . All of these contribute something to the total environment which supports and sustains me. Each in its own way contributes to the well-being of my person. . . . He has put it at my disposal for full and enriched living. All that is sublime, beautiful, dignified, noble, and grand has this as its source. The finest in our literature, music, arts, science, and social intercourse has its base in the generous giving of our Lord” (Phillip Keller).\*

Part of worship is the freedom to live and move and enjoy every single gift the Lord has for us. Worship is not about scarcity. It is about abundance! To enjoy each gift God has for us, every tiniest bit of delight He created on our behalf is to honor Him and His goal is to bless us!

It is possible a child of a different temperament would weather the religious culture of my childhood better than I. Some personalities have less need for the aesthetics in their worship than I do. Some don't have this inner drive to sing and dance and write words of praise. Some don't need to hang twinkling lights or cut out intricate snowflakes.

Then again, maybe those people need people like me, people who lead them to celebration and beauty.

Keller's words are true. Every good bestowal is from the hand of our good God. Every ounce of beauty that delights our souls. Everything that points back to Him. His vitality is sensed in the energy of a dance. His powerful mind in a complex riddle. All that is lived through us that is joyful and good and beautiful and abundant is a reflection of the life of our God, who dwells in joy and abundance. After all, He is the One of whom the psalmist wrote, "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11, NASB).

As I ponder this book and specifically the wounds I've carried surrounding Christmas, epiphany comes. My deepest wound of this season is not the lack of presents or a Christmas tree or a family meal. It is the crushing of my innate person, the one created for celebration. It is the agony of loss of freedom in worshipping my Jesus when my personality cries out for every avenue to be explored. It is the chopping off of the flow of celebration and love that comes from Him and is designed to flow through me to my loved ones in a myriad of ways in any given season.

It isn't just Christmas the enemy has tried to steal from me.

It is *life*!

The right to be who I am and breathe my own air the unique way He created me to do it!

You see, I am a child of dance and song. I am a child of celebration. From the beginning the enemy has sought to steal this from me. He has tried to exploit my desire to please God by turning it into striving instead of joyful surrender and praising advancement. He tried to twist the deep parts of my personality, the "old soul" that is me to make me melancholy instead of simply reflective and insightful. He tried to poison my sanguine temperament with hopelessness.

But he has lost his battles. His schemes are crushed into the ground. Where he sowed pain and despair my Jesus came in and poured His healing blood and turned all that evil had planted into seeds of faith. My Jesus watered those seeds with the showers of blessings and storms of trial and the every-single-day-new-hope of His Light. The

seeds are bursting forth in blossoms, and the garden of my heart where He dwells is fragrant with grace. The turtledoves have arrived and coo their love song there in my garden heart. The garden my Lord planted for His enjoyment. Here there is hope. There is dance and song and celebration. For I am His child, created for joy.

Oh sweet friend, whether your temperament and mine are dissimilar or very much the same, all of us were created for a joyful expression of worship and celebration to our King, Jesus! All of us have fought the battle to turn from the enemy's lies and deceptions to step more fully into who we were created to be. We've all been pressed down. Held back. Blocked at every turn. But no more! *He* is come! This Baby in the manger, this King on the cross. He broke the chains of sin and death and set us free to be all the Father intended at our creation.

*Sweet Jesus! Thank You for setting me free to celebrate. To enjoy the good in this world. To live a vigorous life in Your energy. You already won the victory in the battles I face. Show me where the enemy has stunted my growth and how to claim the freedom You already won for me. I want it all! Full experience of freedom in You. The ability to become all You intend me to be and to enjoy all You intend me to enjoy. Where celebration and love and freedom have been dammed up within me, clear out the blockage!*

\*Selections are from chapter nine of *A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd* by Phillip Keller.



## Week Two Response

How has this week of devotions changed how you view your Christmas tree? Your worship and celebration? The selections put joy and suffering side-by-side in multiple contexts. How do we live in the peace Christ bought in the midst of each?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



## **Week Three ~ Nativity**





## Third Sunday of Advent

### **Light:**

Two purple candles and then the pink one

### **Ponder:**

#### *Joy*

When do you feel the most joy? What is a joy-stealer? Is it possible to have joy in times of sorrow or struggle?

It's interesting that tradition makes the joy candle pink because I think of pink as the color of a tender, surrendered heart. I wonder how joy is connected to surrender?

Jesus came to earth and surrendered to a cruel death for the "joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2). We are that joy. Through this plan of reconciliation between God and man, Jesus is given a bride. As we light the joy candle we celebrate the same wonder the shepherds felt when the angel said, "Fear not, I bring you good tidings of great joy!"

Can't you just see the "multitude" of heavenly host crying in joyous emotion, "Glory to God in the highest!"?

We also look with joy to Christ's second return, when He comes to earth to take His bride to eternal glory—that joyful place where there is no more sorrow.

But we don't only look backward and forward, we look at now. We embrace the joy of being Christ's beloved in *this* moment. He chose you and me. He loves us. His great pleasure is our growing intimacy with Him. Our greatest joy is experiencing His delight in us.

### **Prayer:**

Jesus,

I celebrate You as the Joy-Giver! Thank You for the joy you've brought to this world and to my heart. I rejoice in the tidings of great joy. Thank You for coming to this

earth! I rejoice in my eternal future of joy, living as Your bride. I rejoice in today's joy, the wonder of living fully accepted by You. Delighted in. Adored. I adore You too, Jesus. Empower me to walk in joy this week. May joy keep my heart tender and surrendered to You. Establish me in Your joy and in the joy of living in relationship with You.

**Worship:**

*Sing Joy to the World!*

Print the JOY coloring page (found on Paula's website [www.paulamoldenhauer.com](http://www.paulamoldenhauer.com) and at the end of this book) and listen to carols as you color it.



*Week Three ~ Nativity*

## **Day 1: Light Glory**

*"I am the Light of the world. So if you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, for living light will flood your path."*

*~ John 8:12 TLB*

*"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!"*

*~ Matthew 5:14–16, MSG*

Our first Christmas tree had only white lights. For years we'd hung white lights as a reminder that Jesus, the Light of the World, came to save us from darkness within and without. All other decorations in the years to come will build on that first strand of lights, just as our lives build on Jesus.

Everything begins with Jesus.

Everything of worth builds upon Him.

Life is to be illuminated by His grace and truth. Our lives, our thoughts, our identity, our decisions are illuminated by *His* light shining into us and through us.

It doesn't matter where the enemy lied to us or who tried to steal light from us. It doesn't matter, because Jesus, the Light of the World, is with us now.

Where there is light, darkness flees.

Darkness cannot exist in the presence of light.

Jesus chases the darkness away.

Jesus is the victory.

Life lived in Him is alive. His life lights our way. His light heals us, chases away the darkness in the rooms we've kept locked. His light leads us forward to freedom.

Jesus is the Word Incarnate. The Word is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path.

Jesus, our Light, reveals next steps. Steps of life-giving light.

In Jesus is life, and His life is the light of all mankind. The darkness of this world has not overcome His light. It cannot! (John 1:4)

God's light is pure. In Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

He not only lights our way, He lights *us*! We are like the Christmas tree. It can sit, unnoticed deep in a forest. When night comes, it is shrouded in darkness. But when wrapped in twinkle lights, that tree cannot be hidden.

When we are illuminated by the Light of Jesus, shining from His place as the foundation of our lives, we also are not hidden. We light up our space in this world. We are like Him: pure, white light, like a city set on a hill that can't be hidden. Like a lamp or a candle set in the middle of a dark room.

Even in the dark times of our lives or of the world, His light shines in us and through us.

The first chapter of John says darkness cannot overcome the Light. In this world of suicide bombers and gunmen in schools, the darkness fights for position. In this world of hidden abuses that tear at personal worth and identity, darkness tries to suffocate.

But it cannot win.

In the places of the deepest despair, the most inky black darkness, the tiniest light *always* pushes back the black. Whole caverns of darkness cannot overcome one little flickering candle.

There is no greater worship than a life surrendered to the Light. Surrendered lives pierce the darkness as they lift glowing arms to point to Jesus.

*Jesus, You are perfect light. In You there is no darkness at all. I surrender to Your light. Take it deep inside me and heal me. Shine it at my feet and guide my next steps. Glow within me, lighting me up from the inside out that I may bring glory to Your name. To be Your light is my greatest act of worship. Do what You do best. Shine! Shine in me. Shine on me! Shine through me!*



*Week Three ~ Nativity*

## **Day 2: Flowing Blessings**

*You will open the eyes of the blind. You will free the captives from prison, releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.*

*~ Isaiah 42:7 NLT*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found.*

*~ "Joy to the World" by Isaac Watts*

One of the events I most look forward to during the Christmas season is the hanging of the lights in the evergreens at the intersection near my home. When a gentle breeze stirs the branches, they seem to dance in the rhythm of my heartbeat, singing that my Light has come. Joy to the world! The Lord is come! Let every heart prepare Him room! No more let sin and sorrow grow! He came to make His blessings flow!\*

My heart hasn't always sung at the thought of Jesus' birth. There was the whole not being allowed to celebrate Christmas thing, but there was more to it. Though I accepted Christ at a young age, my understanding of the magnitude of this event was severely limited as was my grasp of Christ's death and resurrection. I knew Jesus, God's Son, came to earth to save me from my sins and make sure that I could spend eternity with the Father. But I was in my thirties before I began to truly grasp His transforming grace. If you've read the *Soul Scents* collection, you know my story.

Christianity meant a ticket to heaven and a long, hard struggle to walk the straight and narrow until I got there. It meant trying very hard and failing often, living under the bondage of failure. I felt I couldn't live up to what I thought were God's expectations of me. I didn't pray enough, read my Bible enough, or witness enough.

Motherhood was especially debilitating. I *knew* I failed there. I should discipline better, be more patient, play with them more, spend more time on their academics, pray for them more often, teach them more skillfully, be a more organized housekeeper . . . the list was never ending. Often I approached God with my head hung in shame, condemnation rolling over me.

Then there was that whole shame around failing my mother. Condemnation was a beast to be slain.

Somewhere I missed the verse that told me that God didn't send Jesus to the world to condemn it, but to save it (John 3:17). Furthermore, the next verse, John 3:18 begins by saying that whoever believes in Jesus is not condemned!

I used to think these scriptures simply meant I wouldn't go to hell. While that is a very good thing, it is a limited understanding of why Christ came. It's not just the condemnation of the final judgment that Christ did away with, but also the condemnation in my daily life.

Everything I've done in the past, am doing now, or will do in the future is cleansed by Jesus' blood. When God looks at me, He sees Jesus.

And Jesus is perfect.

These concepts are especially hard for those of us who are victims of emotional, verbal, or religious abuse.

As the year draws to a close and with it this collection of devotions, my heart cry is for your freedom and mine. And friend, freedom comes from Jesus and His glorious grace.

Have you ever *really* noticed verse three of the beautiful hymn, "O Holy Night"? There is a powerful phrase that says, "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease."\*\*

What oppresses you? What holds you back? Where are you chained? Where in your life is there slavery to lies instead of free living in truth and grace?

Maybe, like me, you need to let go of striving, performance, perfectionism.

Maybe, like me, you've taken on false identities, things the enemy said to you that you believed.

Maybe, like me, there are some people you have to forgive if you're going to move forward. Maybe you have to admit how bad it really was before you can completely let it go.

Maybe, like me, your failures eat at you. Your inability to be all you wanted to be pulls you down.

Maybe, like me, there are rooms in your heart you've refused to enter for years that need Jesus.

Maybe, like me, your scars and wounds have whispered shame and unworthiness and have tried to shut you down.

Oh sweet friend. Chains come in every size.

Give Him permission to reveal them, cut them apart, untangle them.

If you're like my husband and me, you'll need Him to start with the really big, thick ones. In your surrendered state you will make big choices. Like drawing difficult boundaries or leaving bad theology or forgiving someone whose actions were unthinkable. Then He'll cut more chains by asking you to do something weird. Like write a book series or buy your first Christmas tree. And while He's working on those really big, visible chains, He'll also be working on the tiny ones in your heart. These are like golden necklace chains. They aren't bad, but instead of adorning you for His glory, they somehow got all twisted into tiny knots, so He gently rubs the spots, untwists the golden lines, careful not to waste a single thing He plans to use for your joy and His.

*Hallelujah!*

Jesus broke the bondage of our heavy, chained souls. He freed us from the curse of condemnation from within and without. He spread His blessings as far as the curse was found. He broke generational strongholds and patterns of dysfunction. He saved us from the voices. He saved us from ourselves.

It's a done deal. It's ongoing glory.

All the while He whispers that you are worthy of His every effort. He doesn't leave things undone, but faithfully works, as long as it takes, to show you how to live in the healing and freedom He purchased for you at the cross. He calls you to leave the crap behind and stand in the fullness of who He created you to be. He invites you to warmer climates and clean, open spaces where you can run and laugh. He longs for you to embrace His favor. There is no greater worship than surrendering to His love, than embracing His favor, than becoming all He created you to be.

As you drive through the twinkling lights in your neighborhood this Christmas season, remember that your darkness is pierced, your Light has come. May our hearts prepare Him room, singing, "No more let sin and sorrows grow, / Nor thorns infest the ground; / He comes to make His blessings flow / Far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found. . . ."

Joy to the world! Our Lord is come!

*Precious Jesus, thank You for being the light that shines into the dark places, releasing me from sin and despair. You broke the slavery chains in my life. You continue to unravel knots and set me free. You placed me in a wide open space where the warmth of Your presence lights my way. I commit to worshiping You by embracing Your favor. By living as one who is loved, forgiven, and free to dance in joy. I give You all my “not good enoughs” and simply rest in the deep, penetrating grace of Jesus. I let those who’ve wronged me off the hook, handing them over to You for Your healing justice. Thank You, Father God, for the cross of Christ. I trust You to make my heart move with Jesus’ life rhythm. After all, He lives within me, and our hearts beat as one.*

\*Excerpts from “Joy to the World,” text by Isaac Watts

\*\*Excerpt from “O Holy Night,” text by John S. Dwight





*Week Three ~ Nativity*

**Day 3: Glory to God!**

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

*~ Luke 2:8–14, KJV*

It's no accident that when I was in high school I was chosen as one-half of a two person performance based entirely upon Scripture. The script juxtaposed Jesus' birth with His crucifixion. The other actress had a strong, powerful voice. My voice has always had a more gentle quality. She was given the dramatic lines "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!", while I was given the gentle wonderment surrounding the nativity. To this day I have huge selections from Luke's account of the incarnation memorized. I love that even in the years I wasn't able to celebrate the nativity, the Lord implanted worship and wonder around His birth.

My favorite part of the passages I memorized is, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Even as I type it today I hear the rise and fall of my voice, the wonder and passion I felt as I acted out this scene so long ago.

Isn't the Lord sweet? I may not have heard the nativity, read from Scripture, around a glowing tree at Christmas, but He planted my love for the celebration of His birth deep within me as I rehearsed my lines—from Scripture. This worship, grounded in the truth of Scripture, couldn't be denied me.

I invite you into that world I loved as a sixteen-year-old "actress."

Pause a moment.

Reread the verses, only don't glaze over them because you've heard them a million times. Read them like an audience is in front of you, and you are trying to convey the emotion and wonder of every phrase. Maybe you want to stand up right now and do this in the presence of your Lord.

Ask Him to make them alive in you as you do.

Ready?

Go!

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Did your voice rise on the words "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them"? Maybe you emphasized the important parts. "And the *glory* of the *Lord* shone round about them."

Did you feel the fear as you whispered, "And they were sore afraid."

Does your voice take flight as you say, "*Good* tidings of great *joy* which shall be to *all* the people"?

Are you breathless as the next line unfolds? "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a *Saviour*, which is *Christ* the *Lord*!"

Now, if you're like me, you're practically shouting with the multitude of heavenly host, "Glory to God in the highest!" Then your voice cracks a little at the wonder of the great ending, "and on earth *peace*, *good will* toward men."

We rush over it. It's too familiar. You've heard it in songs and at Christmas Eve services and even watched cartoon characters speak it on TV.

But my friend. Oh my friend! Jesus is come. *Jesus* is come. JESUS IS COME!

The great King of all the universe came to earth and brought light to the darkness, peace to the chaos, goodwill—favor—to men! For years the enemy had woven bondage, darkness, and lies over God's most treasured creation.

Then *Jesus*.

Jesus!

His life revealed the very heart of God. He Himself was God and was in closest relationship with the Father (John 1). Those who saw Jesus saw the Father, for Jesus and the Father are one (John 14).

As Jesus revealed God to the world, nothing was as the enemy had said. It wasn't about a wrathful, vengeful God piling rule upon rule on vile mankind.

God is the Father of the prodigal son running out to embrace His wayward child.

He is the businessman who sells all to purchase us, pearls of great price!

He is the compassionate healer who touches blind eyes and makes them see, who makes the lame walk.

He is the One who looks beneath the rule-giving and rule-keeping to the issues of the heart.

He is the One who sets captives free.

That God. That Jesus.

The God of *love*.

That's who left heaven's splendor to be born into a dusty, dirty world full of manure and poverty and despair.

No wonder the angels declared, "I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem!" (Luke 2:10–11, TLB).

*Jesus, I lift my heart to worship with the angels giving glory to God for this great gift. Place the great joy of the good tidings deep within my heart that it might rise up to praise You. You are love. You are good. You are full of splendor. Mighty God come to earth. It's unthinkable the extent You went to so that we could be saved from the darkness, rescued from the lies of the enemy, and shown immeasurable love. Thank You for the peace. Thank You for the freedom. Glory to God in the highest heaven! Praise You for the most joyful news ever announced. You came!*



*Week Three ~ Nativity*

## **Day 4: Wonderful! Counselor!**

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

*~ Isaiah 9:6 KJV*

Do you hear the music? I can't read this verse without Handel's *Messiah* singing through my heart!

*Hallelujah!* (Pun intended. Get it?) The message cannot be held back or trampled down! Even without a background of Christmas celebration, the joyous worship, seeped in Scripture about Christ's birth and passion is forever engraved upon my life (and no doubt the lives of countless others) through Handel's great work, created under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

*Soul Scents: Flourish*, my book on *freedom*—a book that includes a set of *Advent* devotionals— isn't complete without meditating on the first seven verses of Isaiah chapter nine.

Read the following passage slowly. I chose a version that might be less familiar so we can think about the words instead of blazing past them:

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. The light will shine on those living in the land of dark shadows. . . . You will give them great joy. They will be glad before You. . . . For You will break the heavy load from their neck and shoulders. You will break the power of those who made it hard for them. . . . For to us a Child will be born. To us a Son will be given. And the rule of the nations will be on His shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful, Teacher, Powerful God, Father Who Lives Forever, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to His rule and His peace, upon the throne of David and over his nation. He will

build it to last and keep it strong with what is right and fair and good from that time and forever. The work of the Lord of All will do this (Isaiah 9:2–7, NLV).\*

The first phrase that jumps out at me is “land of dark shadows.” I don’t know about you, but some of my most painful seasons felt shadowed. As I mentioned earlier in this book, it was almost like life played out in black and white instead of in color. But God “has rescued us and has drawn us to Himself from the dominion of darkness, and has transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13, AMP). Because of His work on the cross, the heavy burdens of sin and condemnation are lifted from our shoulders, and He breaks the power—the control—of the evil that seeks to weigh us down and make life hard on us.

When we see God as He really is—the glorious One who is wonderful, our teacher and counselor, all-powerful, and full of peace, the God who gave so much to set us free, the God who is love—we learn to look to Him for identity, leadership, and strength. As we discover who we are in Him, mining Scripture for our identity instead of listening to the false voices, praying and seeking God’s perspective and learning His voice, we live more and more in the freedom He purchased for us at the cross.

We were taken *out* of the land of shadows.

Remember the despair? The depression? The feelings of self-loathing? He moved us “outta” that awful place and took us to a place full of light! The light shines all around us illuminating a beautiful, colorful landscape. In this Kingdom of Light, He tells us things like:\*\*

*I love you.* “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness” (Jeremiah 31:33, NIV).

*You are My treasure.* “Of all the people on earth, the LORD your God has chosen you to be his own special treasure” (Deuteronomy 7:6, NLT).

*I gave My most precious Son to make you My own.* “For God so [greatly] loved and dearly prized the world, that He [even] gave His [One and] only begotten Son, so that whoever believes and trusts in Him [as Savior] shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16, AMP).

*You are free to live outside of bondage!* “It was for this freedom that Christ set us free [completely liberating us]” (Galatians 5:1, AMP).

*You are My precious child.* “God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure” (Ephesians 1:5, NLT).

*You are pure, righteous, holy.* “Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin” (1 Corinthians 1:30, NLT).

*I never condemn you, My child. "Therefore there is now no condemnation [no guilty verdict, no punishment] for those who are in Christ Jesus [who believe in Him as personal Lord and Savior]" (Romans 8:1, AMP).*

*You are My masterpiece and through you we will do good works. Who you are and what you do is valuable to Me. "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10, NLT).*

*I've prepared a place for you to live with Me forever. "There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2, NLT).*

*You are My beautiful bride. "[The Bridegroom)] Behold, how beautiful you are, my darling, Behold, how beautiful you are! Your eyes are dove's eyes" (Song of Solomon 1:15, AMP).\*\*\**

Oh sweet friend! The birth of Jesus changed *everything!*

Let's ponder our passage again in light of what you just read:

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish. . . .

The people who walk in [spiritual] darkness  
Will see a great Light;  
Those who live in the dark land,  
The Light will shine on them. . . .

You will multiply their joy;  
They will rejoice before You  
Like the joy and jubilation of the harvest,  
As men rejoice when they divide the spoil [of victory].

For You will break the yoke of Israel's burden and the staff (goad) on their  
shoulders,  
The rod of their oppressor . . .

For to us a Child shall be born, to us a Son shall be given;  
And the government shall be upon His shoulder,  
And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

There shall be no end to the increase of His government and of peace,

[He shall rule] on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness  
From that time forward and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this (Isaiah 9:1–7, AMP).

Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth! And “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty [emancipation from bondage, true freedom]” (2 Corinthians 3:17, AMP). Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is love, for God is love (1 John 4:8)!

*Praise to Almighty God, Omnipotent Father! Praise to Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who came as a vulnerable baby and died as a courageous God-man to set us free! Praise You Triune God, Lord of heaven and earth! You establish Your kingdom of freedom and uphold it with righteousness and justice. You liberated me. In You I have true freedom. I am emancipated! I am loved and free to love!*

\*This prophecy was originally given to the nation of Israel. The New Testament makes it clear that when we accept Jesus we are adopted into the promises given God’s people. In quoting this passage I left out phrases I thought might distract you from the message of these verses. Most of the ellipses replace phrases that would make sense to someone in Israel when it was written, but that might not give you much clarity. It might be fun for you to look these Scriptures up in your Bible and think further about the passage in its completeness.

\*\*I could go on and on about how wonderful God is and how wonderfully He loves us! I could write books about who God says you are and how He talks to you! Actually I guess I have. It’s the heartbeat of the first three books of the *Soul Scents* series.

\*\*\*Scripture calls us the bride of Christ. One of my favorite places to discover His love for me is in the reading of the Song of Solomon as a statement of His love for me, personally. Have you read it lately?



*Week Three ~ Nativity*  
**Day 5: Pondering**

*I'm bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened —  
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It's exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.  
~ Luke 1:46–55 MSG*

Have you ever thought about Mary's Magnificat, how it is both personal and corporate at the same time? She starts out by worshiping in wonderment that God chose *her*. Other versions of Mary's song use phrases like: He took notice, He looked with loving care, He looked on me, one who is not important. Mary stands in wonder that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords chose *her*.



Then Mary moves into praise that is both personal and corporate, for her son would also be her *Savior*. Mary worships the Messiah who came to scatter bluffing braggarts, knock tyrants off their high horses, and pull victims out of the mud. (Other versions say He scatters the proud and exalts the humble, that He brings down rulers and fills the hungry with good things.)

As I read this passage today it feels intensely personal.

He looked upon *me*.

Upon *you*.

The King of Kings and Lord of Lords took notice, looked upon *us* with loving care. We may think we are not important, that we are humble and lowly. Nobodies. But *God* chose *us*.

He chose us to be the recipients of His grace and mercy. He chose us to receive His light and life-giving truth. He chose us for truth that sets us free. He chose us. For us He comes, baring His arm and showing His strength. He fights for our freedom.

He won it at the cross.

And He fights for each of His beloved, showing them the freedom already won.

He stands firm against evil and teaches us how to do the same.

He invites our poor, hungry hearts to a banquet of His love.

He came so we could flourish.

I love Mary.

I imagine her—young and weary. She's spent way too much time on a donkey and now she's given birth—for the first time—in a dirty, stinky place. I'm sure it wasn't what she expected when she sang out her Magnificat. But then the shepherds come. *Shepherds*. They are the class of people who don't intimidate her, but certainly not who was expected to celebrate the birth of the King! But they have lovely, breathtaking news. When her Son was born, the very sky opened wide revealing a multitude of angels singing and dancing and shouting about *His* birth. And they sent shepherds—shepherds!—to gaze upon her little boy.

Mary's been through a lot. The accuser has been hard at work, heaping condemnation upon her. Instead of the honor she expected as one chosen to carry the King, she's been called a harlot. And worse.

But the shepherds get it.

They see and honor her child.

Honor her.

They say her baby, *her* baby, is the Savior of the world.

In those weeks of unjust condemnation, in those months of ridicule and gossip and pointing fingers, those months when her body swelled and hurt, when her emotions were raw, when weariness overcame her, it'd taken all she had to believe the truth.

She wasn't condemned.

She was honored.

Chosen.

Blessed.

And her Son, her tiny baby sleeping in a trough meant for animals, was King, *Savior* of the world.

Nothing really made sense, but God was at work. In those brief moments of wonderment, when His Spirit gave direction and explanation, she saw it. She held onto it. She had to.

Life was much harder than she expected.

But it was also more glorious.

Angels.

Shepherds.

"Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself"  
(Luke 2:19, MSG).

Later the magi came. Then the wild flight to safety in Egypt. Finally to Nazareth, where the wagging of tongues continued.

But through it all, "Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart"  
(Luke 2:19, NASB).

Friends, our freedom came at a cost for Jesus.

It comes at a cost for us.

Only our Lord knows what events will take place on our journey into the glory of His plans.

But He comes to us with promise.

Personal and corporate.

We believe the Scriptures, the promises that our Savior freed us from the darkness and places us in His kingdom. Those promises are for all, corporately and individually. But He doesn't stop there. He whispers truth as we read His Scripture. We hear wisdom in the words of those around us. Lines from songs jump out and grab our attention and play for years in our hearts. We learn His voice. Sometimes He whispers in the night or gives dreams or sends prayer warriors. We test everything to be certain it is from Him, and we cling to, ponder, treasure all of it in our hearts. When He comes

with instructions—personal instruction—like it's time to flee a tyrannical king or receive a personal blessing—like hints of the great callings of our life, we respond. Quickly. We believe.

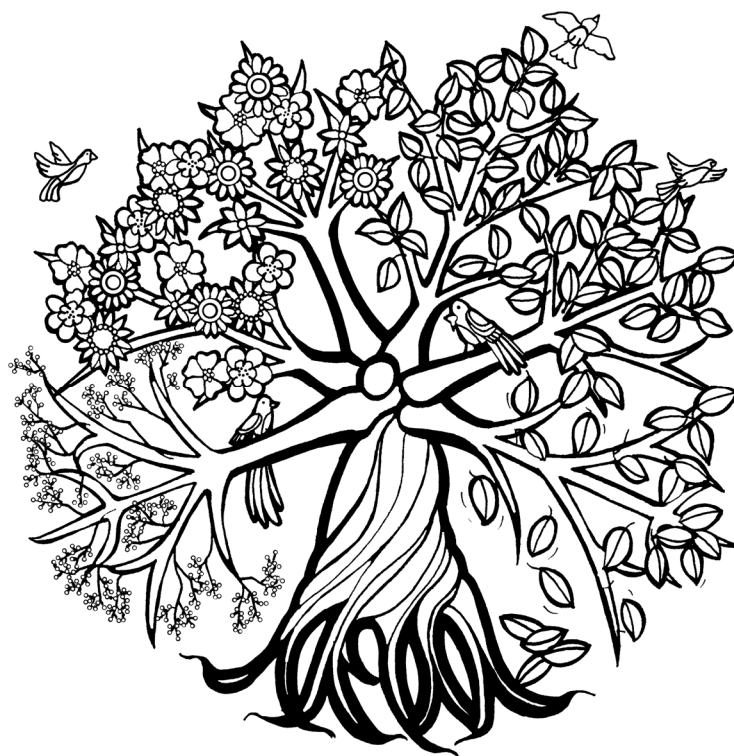
*Jesus, like Your mother, Mary, I am just me. Complicated and simple. Emotional sometimes. Afraid often. But capable of great movement as I surrender to Your Spirit. I treasure everything You've told me, every event You've orchestrated. You regarded my lowly estate and fought for my freedom. I am Your servant. Your bride. Your beloved. I have a bigger picture than Mary did. I know how Your life here on earth unfolded. I know that the cross, which pierced precious Mary's heart, won the victory for my life. I know You purchased me so I could live in joyful intimacy with You. You won me for Yourself. I surrender to Your love. To Your sacrifice. I ponder all You've done for me, personally and corporately. Help me to listen to Your voice. Keep me from the lies of the deceiver, the voice of the accuser, and help me to know Your voice only. When You speak, let me be like Mary and say yes to all You ask. Help me move when You ask me to move. Help me surrender to the call of my life, the plans You had before establishing the foundations of the world.*



## Week Three Response

What part of the nativity story brings you most joy? How does a fuller understanding of all Christ accomplished at the cross affect your ability to be joyful? What are some simple moments of joy you experienced this week?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice or general writing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.



## **Week Four ~ Vignettes of Worship**



## Fourth Sunday of Advent

### **Light:**

The four colored candles in order(two purple, one pink, the third purple)

### **Ponder:**

*Love*

God is love.

What does that mean to you?

God's basis for interaction with you is always steeped in love.

Think about the things you're looking forward to this week. How are they made better when they are experienced with a focus on God's love? What about the things that are a struggle? How does your perception of them change as you look at them with the idea of God's love working in all situations?

Jesus' choice to enter the darkness of our world was a choice of love. He didn't come because we had it all together. He came because we didn't. But He also didn't come to shake a disapproving finger. Scripture says He didn't come to condemn the world but to save it. He came out of love to establish love. His love is corporate, for all who live, have lived, or will live.

His love is personal.

For *you*.

His love comes to each of us in a variety of expressions. Here are a few: loving friendship, brotherly love, the love of Savior, a Creator's love, the love of the Good Shepherd, the love of Lord, the love of the Bridegroom.

Think of specific ways you experience the love of Jesus. Take a few moments to thank Him for them.

**Prayer:**

Jesus,

You are love. Open my heart to know Your love in greater fullness. As I am filled up on love, pour love through me back to Yourself and to the people around me.

I love you, Jesus.

**Worship:**

Sometimes we put our worship in a box. What if you think of your favorite Christmas love song and sing it to Jesus—or listen to it and ponder how Jesus would sing it to you?

Sing the old chorus *I love You, Lord*.



*Week Four~ Vignettes of Worship*

**Day 1: Quiet**

*Be still, and know that I am God.*

*~ Psalm 46:10 KJV*

The hush that accompanies a heavy snow speaks quiet into my soul. The white blanket muffles the sounds, and even with the cold, I feel somehow insulated.

The snow changes everyday noises too. The ground underneath my feet now gives off a crunch instead of a clack or a thud. Even my car tires make a wonderful, squeaky sound as I pull into our cul-de-sac on a cold, snowy night.

There's stillness in a freshly snowed-in world that I don't experience at other times, and it makes me want to do calm things—like bake cinnamon rolls, read a good book, or take a leisurely walk to watch snowflakes fall.

When it snows at night, one of my favorite things to do is to brew myself a hot cup of herb tea, turn off all the lights, and watch the snowflakes out my window as they drift earthward in the glow of the lamplight.

God feels very close in these times. Perhaps the changes in routine, the slowing down for a snowy day, and the hushed, snow-muffled sounds help my heart quiet. I'm not sure. But I notice the Lord in the stillness.

There are many types of noise in life. A blaring radio and angry, honking rush hour traffic is noise. Busy schedules and long to-do lists are noise. Hateful words, unjust criticism is noise. But noise can also be found inside us. Worry and fear rattle around in our souls until they feel harried and loud instead of hushed and peaceful. Anger—whether at others or ourselves—can make our hearts clang with rapid heartbeats and heated scenarios. Taking those outside voices of negativity and assault into my interior places—owning them. Perhaps that's the worst kind of noise.

But Jesus says, "Be still, and know that I am God."

The word curses. The heart bruises. The verbal and emotional scarring.



It was part of Jesus' crushing.

And from the fragrance comes my freedom.

He says I am worthy.

He says I am loved.

Though my sins and the sins of those who wounded me are many, He says, "Come, let's talk this over, . . . no matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow" (Isaiah 1:18, TLB).

Like the blanket of white which covers my yard, unmarred by a single footstep, He covers me.

I am as clean as freshly fallen snow.

I am untouched by noise of the enemy.

All is blanketed, hushed, as the presence of Jesus reminds me of the truth.

I am new. Safe. Pure. Enveloped in His feathery blanket of white.

So are you.

*Sweet Jesus, let Your peace fall upon me, as pure and gentle as snowflakes. May I know You in this hushed moment. May I believe in my purified state.*



*Week Four ~ Vignettes of Worship*

**Day 2: Ella**

*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.*

*~ Psalm 150:6 NIV*

Little Ella's big brown eyes shine as she raises her hands to God. A live porcelain doll, her head full of curls sways as she moves to the music, a contented smile gracing her tiny face. At three years old, Ella has no inhibition. She doesn't notice us watching her.

We are not her audience.

Ella moves in praise to Jesus. The church people around her aren't dancing. Here and there a solitary worshiper stands with hands raised, but most are simply quiet before the Lord, seated and meditative.

Ella is not mimicking the worship of others, nor is she held back by the more conservative expression of her elders. She simply follows the prompting in her heart.

An unexpected rush of tears comes as I watch. Ella's worship, so genuine and innocent, paints a picture of adoration. There is no doubt in my mind that Ella loves her Creator and is showing Him through her little dance.

As I reflect on the Advent season, I think often of Ella. Such an innocent act of praise is a rare jewel in a rushed and busy world. I'm learning some things from that little girl.

First, Ella worships God as if no one watches. She dances without wondering if the person next to her thinks she's inappropriate or awkward. She is not stifled by self-awareness. Ella just follows her desire to praise, expressing her heart in freedom.

It's an important lesson for me to learn. To make my choices based on my love for Jesus instead of the approval of men.

With the hurts of my past came much accusation. Judgment. Pain. Now I know they were simply hisses from the accuser who tried to kill and destroy the garden of my

heart. I will not live for men's approval. I will live to bring joy to the heart of the One I love, the One who set me free. The One who loves me too.

Ella also comes to God in absolute joy and confidence. She didn't doubt her worthiness to do such a thing. She doesn't question if He likes her or her style of worship. Ella simply dances before God as the beloved daughter she is. The look of absolute joy in her face indicates that she feels His pleasure in her gift of praise.

I embrace this truth. In Him I am welcome. I am worthy. He likes me, and He likes every single offering I bring from my heart of love for Him.

I bring Him pleasure.

You, sweet, sweet friend, bring Him pleasure too.

In Him you are always welcome. Worthy.

He treasures your every offering of love.

*Dearest Jesus, fill me to overflowing with Your love. I want to worship the Trinity in joy that cannot be held back. I want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that You welcome my attention and delight in my worship. Help me follow You, give to You, worship You without wondering what anyone else will think. You are worthy of every ounce of worship within me. Show me how to express the love inside. Make it swell within, overwhelming me with the wonder of You. Show me how to express adoration. Capture me, heart and soul, and give my praise dancing feet.*



*Week Four ~ Vignettes of Worship*

**Day 3: Adoration**

*"Come and behold Him,  
Born the King of angels.  
O come let us adore Him,  
Christ the Lord."\**

Jesus, Creator of the universe. King of all time. The very Word of God come to earth as a helpless baby, dependent upon a young girl for nourishment. Hunted by cruel King Herod. Under the protection of a poor carpenter.

It's preposterous.

Scripture says the angels watched in baffled amazement as God's plan for the redemption of man unfolded. They couldn't believe God would choose to become flesh and hang out with lowly man. To think the Holy One would allow those infinitely inferior to Him to birth Him, raise Him, and eventually kill Him seems outrageous. And yet that's what our Lord did. He left the splendor and perfection of heaven to walk among us, teach us who God is, and save us from ourselves.

"Come," the song says. "Come and adore the Lord! Behold the King of angels wrapped in cloth and born as man."

And while something divine within swells and longs to shout in exultant worship, we sometimes feel ill qualified to offer adoration. All we give and think and say and do seems minuscule in comparison to what He deserves and who He is.

Maybe it's that old performer, the one who had to be perfect, trying too hard to gain the approval she already has.

Maybe that's why sometimes it is hard to come—to know how to adore.

What does adoration look like? How do I offer it to *God*?

As I grapple with these questions, the face of my nephew at the age of two flashes onto the screen of my mind. He is grinning. His whole face is alight—brown

eyes sparkling and smile free and full. His expression says, "I know you adore me, Auntie Paula, and I'm thrilled by it."

What amazes me about this memory is how little I'd done to elicit such a delighted response from the tiny guy. I'd simply looked his way, gazed into his big eyes, and smiled at him.

Adoration.

Perhaps that is all the Lord asks as well. No contrived worship. No cooked up accolades. No forced exultation. No struggle to give Him all He deserves. No fussing and worrying and feeling inadequate.

Just a humble, honest acknowledgment of love.

Perhaps Jesus simply waits for us to glance His way, look Him full in the eyes, and smile.

Come.

Let us adore Him.

*I love you, Jesus. Thank You for entering this world and saving it.*

\* According to <https://www.carols.org.uk>, the text to the carol "O Come All Ye Faithful" was originally written in Latin (Adeste Fideles) and was intended to be a hymn. It is attributed to John Wade, an Englishman. The music to "O Come All Ye Faithful" was composed by fellow Englishman John Reading in the early 1700s. The tune was first published in a collection known as "Cantus Diversi" in 1751. In 1841 Rev. Frederick Oakley is reputed to have worked on the familiar translation of "O Come All Ye Faithful" which replaced the older Latin lyrics "Adeste Fideles."



*Week Four ~ Vignettes of Worship*

**Day 4: Filling Empty Places**

*"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

*~ Matthew 1:23 NIV*

I cradle my mug and light a candle. It's one of those mornings when the quiet of the house closes in on me. After more than twenty years of homeschooling, the house ringing with noise and activity, I can't get used to empty-nest halls.

Breakfast is the hardest. My husband left for work at 5:30 this morning, and the long hours stretch before me. I doubt he'll be home before six tonight. My work is solitary.

Alone.

My days are too.

I watch the flame dip and bounce in the dim winter light. Pulling my prayer journal close, I take another sip of coffee, then write about how lonely I feel.

An ember of joy flickers as I sense His presence. "I don't want you to think of it as being alone," He whispers. "I AM always here."

The house still feels too quiet, but the lack of sound is no longer deafening.

I am never alone.

The virgin gave birth to Immanuel, God *with* me.

I plug in the twinkle lights and turn on a CD of favorite carols.

Quiet no longer means sad. He fills the empty places. In me. In the bedrooms no longer used and living rooms that stay clean. I'm not sure when I will come completely out the other side of empty nest doldrums, but it helps to remember there is one sweet Presence who never moves out. In this quiet space I appreciate the freedom to be with Him without distraction.

Oh how tenderly He loves.

“Silent Night” plays in the background.  
My heart is calm and quiet.  
Whispers of gratitude emerge.

*Immanuel, my precious Jesus. Thank You that I am never alone. Fill the empty places with Your sweetness. My worship today is gentle, offered in whispered gratitude. For You. Because You are here.*



*Week Four ~ Vignettes of Worship*

**Day 5: The Gift of Grace**

*GOD is good to one and all; everything he does is suffused with grace.*

*~ Psalm 145:9 MSG*

Come.

Do you hear the Master calling?

There's a twinkle in His eyes and a huge gift in His hands. Notice how the golden paper glistens with a metallic gleam? And don't you just love the big, blood-red bow?

A present. Just in time for the holidays.

Your Best Friend is really excited about your gift. He's done all the work—choosing carefully what you need most, going to great sacrifice to procure it for you. All that's left is for you to open it. Won't you focus on Him and unwrap His gift?

You pull the pretty velvet bow apart and lift the lid. You can't see what's inside, but you can smell it. It smells like lilacs and fresh cut grass and sunshine. You can feel the present, too. It's solid as iron, soft as a baby's cheek, and makes you warm all over. You can even hear your gift. One minute it swells with symphonic melody, the next it sings with the sweetness of a child. You can almost taste it on your tongue. It's meat, potatoes, and vegetables—all that is solid and healthy—and it is also silky chocolate and all that is sweet.

"What is it?" You ask.

"It's My grace." He speaks with hushed voice, a tinge of emotion lacing His words.

You stare at the box. You've heard about grace before, but you've never really experienced it. Who knew that grace would have a smell, a feel, a taste?

He suggests you reach inside.

You pull out a G and frown.



Jesus chuckles. "G is for guilty no more. Too many times you heap condemnation upon yourself. You are overwhelmed with your many tasks and feel guilty that there's dust on the mantel. But it goes deeper. You beat yourself up for faults and failures I've erased from your record. I've already forgotten them. There's no need to be angry with yourself. I gave My life so you could live without condemnation. You are guilty no more. If you don't believe Me, read Romans 8:1. Read it a thousand times and tape it on your bathroom mirror. Live as you are, My dear: Free from condemnation."

You have a big lump in your throat and since you can't talk, you reach back into the box. The letter R is in your hand.

The Lord gently lifts your face to His. "R is for Rest in Me. Come to Me when you labor and are heavy-laden and overburdened, and I will cause you to rest. I will ease and relieve and refresh your soul." \*

"I try, but it is so hard to rest," you say.

Jesus tilts his head. "Think about a nursing baby—how a mother cradles him in her arms, and he nuzzles to her breast. He is nourished, body and soul. Even as he was fed, he never takes his eyes off of his mother, gazing with complete satisfaction, trust, and peace. Rest in Me as that baby rested. I will nourish you. I will lead and comfort you."

Your eyes are glued to the Master, hungry to believe all He is saying, but there is hesitancy, a fear you don't deserve to rest.

My child, did the baby do anything to earn love?"

You shake your head. "He could do nothing to help his mother."

"In the same way, I don't expect you to earn My love or the right to rest. I simply come and say, 'Are you tired? Let Me help you. Are you burdened? Let Me carry it.'"

Little tears gather in your eyes as you listen to Him. It's so much to absorb, and you haven't even spelled out the whole word. You hesitate. The Lord reaches in the box and pulls out the next letter, A. With trembling fingers you reach for it, running your thumb down its long, sleek sides.

"Accept My unconditional love," He says. "I stand before you with My arms open wide, longing to enfold you in them, but too often you duck your head and walk away. You let shame, guilt, or feelings of inadequacy keep you from Me. Sometimes you push Me away in anger. But I have loved you with an everlasting love.\*\* Nothing you've ever done has made Me regret loving you, and nothing can take My love away.

"When I died on Calvary, I made it possible for us to be in close relationship. I washed your every misstep away in the river of My blood. There is nothing to separate us." \*\*\*

You're weeping freely now. He's right. The Christian life is about Jesus and the righteousness He gives. You keep making it about your performance, causing both your pride and your guilt to keep you from His arms. "I'm sorry," you whisper.

Jesus puts an arm around you. "Take the next letter."

You reach into the box and hand Him the C. He lays it across your heart. "C is for Christ in you, dearest. I am your hope of glory. You try so hard to be good. Trust Me, and let Me make you good. The good work I've begun in you will be completed. Stop striving. You are My masterpiece. Will I not finish it?" \*\*\*\*

The Lord reaches into the box for the last letter. You still weep silently, leaning your head against His shoulder. "E is for Empowered. I am the One who empowers you to be all I've created you to be. Spiritual maturity isn't chasing after good works or achieving your dreams. It isn't being perfect. It is knowing Me and letting your life flow from our relationship.

"Let Me empower you, dear one. I am the one who gives you the grace to accomplish all I ask of you." \*\*\*\*\*

You nod. He hugs you and then kisses your cheek. You sit awhile, fingering each letter, His words echoing in your soul. Then you place those elegant, golden letters on your mantel, one-by-one:

G—Guilty no more

R—Rest in Christ

A—Accept His unconditional love

C—Christ, my hope of glory

E—Empowered by His Spirit

You linger next to them, breathing in the scent of grace. There could be no greater gift.

*Sweet Jesus, thank You for the gift of grace. May I believe it. Taste it. Touch it. Inhale it. Linger in it. And may I know it so well it flows freely from me to others.*

\*Matthew 11:28, AMPC

\*\*Jeremiah 31:3

\*\*\*Romans 8:35

\*\*\*\*Ephesians 2:10, NLT

\*\*\*\*\*Philippians 4:13



## Week Four Response

Think about how much you are loved by God. What new understanding of His love do you have that you didn't last year? Think about how you love Him. What new insights about Him invite your love for Him to grow?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



## **Meditation for Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning**

### **Light:**

All of the candles, (purple, purple, pink, purple) ending with the white one

### **Ponder:**

*Jesus is the Light of the World!*

How is Jesus the Light of Your life? The life you share as a family?

White is a symbol of purity. The Bible says that Jesus, the Light of the world, has no darkness at all.

Wow.

He's completely Light. Completely righteous. Good. Holy. Beautiful. Perfect. Hopeful.

The is NO darkness in our Jesus, only illumination.

Jesus' trip to our planet ushered in His kingdom, the Kingdom of Light. In this kingdom there is no condemnation, no rejection, no hopeless person or situation.

There is only light.

Pure, healing, perfect light that shines into the darkest place and calls us to live as beloved children of God. Clarifying light that shows us how to live.

Is there a darkness in your life that pulls you down? Ask Jesus to shine His light and make the darkness flee.

In this day of celebration turn from darkness. Look instead to the Light. Rejoice in all Jesus did when He came to earth. Receive hope, peace, joy, and love—and share it with all who are a part of your celebration.

**Prayer:**

Jesus,

I praise You, Light of the World, the one in whom there is no darkness at all. Thank You for coming to a dark planet and establishing the hopeful presence of Your light. Illuminate my darkness. Shine upon me and through me.

**Worship:**

Listen to Hillsong's *Here I am to Worship*. If you know it, sing it as a family.

Take turns picking a favorite Christmas carol and worship together for as long as you want.

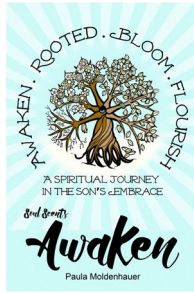


## Christmas Response

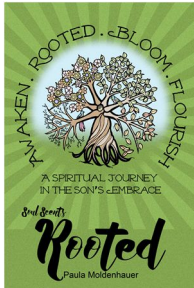
Take a moment to record thoughts about why this Christmas was special. Maybe a family memory. Maybe a reflection of something new you learned this year about Jesus.

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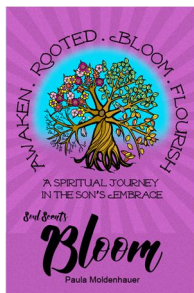
## The Soul Scents Collection



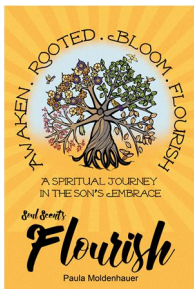
*Soul Scents: Awaken*, book one in the series, invites readers to awaken to a more intimate, peaceful relationship with God.



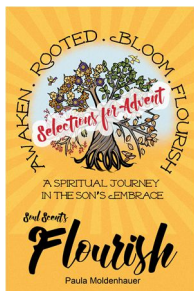
Become more deeply rooted in your identity in Christ by journeying with Paula through *Soul Scents: Rooted*. The second book in the collection, it includes topics such as worthiness, spiritual battle, and destiny.



Book three, *Soul Scents: Bloom*, invites readers to bloom in sunshine and storm. It explores how God's Spirit carries us through struggle, offering the love, strength, and wisdom we need in times of trial and how He rejoices with us in the joyous seasons.



In the fourth book, Paula invites readers to take the *Soul Scents: Flourish* journey and brave deeper healing, letting go of shame and learning to live as vibrant daughters of the King!



*Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Advent* offers four weeks of devotional thoughts, Scriptures, and prayers for reflection and worship in the weeks before Christmas.



## Also by Paula

Novellas in the *Tinseled Tidings* series are available for Kindle from Amazon.com:

*You're a Charmer, Mr. Grinch*

*The Joy Scrooge* (Nov 2017)

*Fruitcake Fallout* (Nov 2017)

And in print from Amazon.com (Dec 2017) as:

*The Tinseled Tidings Collection* (Vol. 1)

These full-length novels are available in print and Kindle formats from Amazon.com:

*A Packaged Deal* (Nov 2017)

Book 1 in the *Towering Pines* series

and

*Titanic: Legacy of Betrayal*

Paula's historical novella, *At Home with Daffodils*, included in the inspirational romance collection, *A Bouquet of Brides*, releases January 2018 from Barbour Publishing.

*Soul Scents: Awaken, Rooted, Bloom, and Flourish*, a four-book devotional series, are available through Amazon.com in print and Kindle formats.

*Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Advent* is available for free download at:

[www.paulamoldenhauer.com](http://www.paulamoldenhauer.com) or on Kindle for 99 cents. \*This is a four-week excerpt from the thirteen-week book and includes extra content specific to Advent worship.



## About the Author



Author, speaker, and mom of four, Paula Moldenhauer encourages others to live free to flourish. She shares this message when speaking at women's events, and it permeates her written work. Paula has published over 300 times in non-fiction markets, writing articles, devotionals, and curriculum. Her four-book devotional book series, *Soul Scents*, catalogs her journey of learning to live in the Son's embrace. Her first published novella, *You're a Charmer Mr. Grinch*, was a finalist in the ACFW Carol Awards, and she now has six published works of fiction. For a full list of Paula's books, opportunity to get her newsletter and other free downloads, or to engage her to speak at your next women's event, visit her website: [www.paulamoldenhauer.com](http://www.paulamoldenhauer.com).

Paula and her husband, Jerry, are in the revolving-door stage of empty nesting. They enjoy long walks and the good conversations of a less busy household, and they celebrate the gift of chaos when their home is once again full of their growing family. They have four precious adult children, two amazing children-in-law, and are delighted with the girlfriends who now populate family gatherings. Family is their heartbeat. Paula loves peppermint ice cream, going barefoot, and adventuring with friends. The opportunity to worship God in her part-time job as a staff singer for Soli Dei choir is a delight.

To book Paula to speak at your next event, contact her at [paula@paulamoldenhauer.com](mailto:paula@paulamoldenhauer.com).

To be notified of free gifts and to receive Paula's inspirational newsletter, sign-up on her website: [www.paulamoldenhauer.com](http://www.paulamoldenhauer.com).

Visit Paula's author page on Amazon.com to see updated listings of her books or keep up through her author/speaker page on Facebook.

## **Lisa-Joy's Artwork**

Lisa-Joy invites you to her Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/lisajoyart> to see her illustrations, letter art, and coloring book page designs. She begins each work by hand thereby creating its clean, optimistic style. Contact Lisa-Joy at [lisajoyart@gmail.com](mailto:lisajoyart@gmail.com). A free download of this coloring page is available at [www.PaulaMoldenhauer.com/gifts](http://www.PaulaMoldenhauer.com/gifts).

