



WHAT ARE YOU
waiting
FOR?

LISTEN TO
YOUR LONGING

*An Advent and Christmas Guide
for Personal Spiritual Practice
from Sacredise.com*

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for Personal Spiritual Practice
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Introduction

When the world is in turmoil and we become weary, we often begin to feel off-balance and insecure. We want to hope, but we're not sure we can because our hopes have been dashed so many times. We long to go back to a life that feels more 'normal'. We want to relax and laugh. We want the freedom of not having to be always on the alert as we navigate the stress.

The last few years have been a very difficult season. And many of us have found that our faith has come under pressure in ways we've never experienced before. We have learned that we need a stronger, more resilient, and more sustaining spiritual practice.

Advent and Christmas are wonderful opportunities to connect more deeply with the God who came in human flesh. They are designed to lead us into a deeper and richer experience of God's abundant life—if we will just learn the lessons they offer. And if we enter into these seasons intentionally, we can set ourselves up for a richer and more vibrant life in the year ahead.

Advent is a time of waiting and longing. It's a time when we connect more deeply with God's saving purpose. And it's when we place the incarnation of Christ in the context of God's eternal work in our world and our lives. This is the key to unlock the treasures of these seasons.

One of the most important things we can do to maximise the opportunity for growth and health that Advent and Christmas offer is to listen to our longings. When we listen to our hearts, we get in touch with what we really want in our lives. We connect with what would make us feel more fully alive and connected. We discover what really matters to us and what gives our lives a sense of meaning and purpose. And when we've taken note of what our longings tell us, we can then turn to the incarnate Christ to find out how to fulfil those longings! The Jesus who comes to us in Christmas shows us what we need to do to find the abundant life he promised.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

That's why I'm so excited to share this new Guide for Personal Spiritual Practice with you! *What Are You Waiting For?* is designed to lead you on a spiritual practice journey through Advent and Christmas. Each week you will explore one of your primary longings and allow Christ to show the way to fulfilment and abundant life.

Based on the Lectionary readings for Year C (the Gospel of Luke), *What Are You Waiting For?* will take you deeper into the incarnation story and offer practical ways to plan for a deeper and richer life in the year to come.

To get the most out of this guide, you will need to set aside at least ten to fifteen minutes every day. I recommend that you have a journal, or a dedicated document on your phone, tablet, or computer to record your thoughts, questions, and insights. You can also make notes of any specific practical things you want to bring into or change in your life.



If your church is using this journey in your Sunday worship, the content in each week is the same as that which is used to guide the sermon in church. The practices you find in this guide are based on this content and you are invited to return to it throughout the week. The practices themselves are tailored to help you to engage more deeply with the message of the week, and are repeated throughout the week. Some of the practices remain the same or similar throughout the entire Advent and Christmas journey for the same reason.

A REPEATING PRACTICE

Repetition often moves us past an initial, shallow engagement and removes any resistances we may have to more difficult or challenging insights. As we repeat a practice, so our defences begin to relax and the Spirit is able to speak to us in ways that are not possible without the repeated practice. I encourage you not to skip over the repeating parts, but to engage in them with intention throughout the journey.

It is my hope and prayer that *What Are You Waiting For?* will not only be meaningful for you, but that it will be transforming. I believe that a mindful and intentional use of the Advent and Christmas seasons can set us up for a more intentional and meaningful life in the year to come. And that is what I hope this guide will do for you!

May God guide and bless you as you listen to your longings through the twin seasons of Advent and Christmas with *What Are You Waiting For?*

John

We Long To Be Alive

Advent 1

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 21:25-36

REFLECTION

How alive are you in this moment? How attuned are you to the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations happening within you? How connected do you feel to the world around you? How attentive are you to your loved ones? Take a minute or two and allow these questions to heighten your awareness of yourself and of the life pulsing within you.

If you find yourself feeling vibrantly alive, to what do you attribute that sense? Most of us associate feeling alive with feeling good, energised, inspired, and happy. We love feeling this way and miss it when it's gone. We may even give lots of time and energy to preserving this sense of aliveness. But we all know what it feels like to be less than fully alive. In one sense we need times when we feel sad, tired, or depressed in order to know what aliveness feels like. But it isn't healthy to remain in a perpetual state of lifelessness. We know this and that's why we long to feel alive as much as we can.

There is no shortage of things that can rob us of our most alive and engaged self. The last two years have given us a close up look at many of these things: isolation, insecurity, polarisation, financial stress, misinformation, and threats to our health, to mention a few. We tend to take it for granted that certain events or experiences that we call 'negative' will leave us feeling deadened. But does life have to work that way?

I'm not saying that we can always live in a state of bliss. No one gets through this human experience without tragedy, suffering, and failure. But I do believe that it is possible to navigate life, with all its joys and sorrows, in a way that keeps us alive, alert, and engaged most of the time. And the key to sustaining our aliveness is our miraculous human capacity for hope.

When Jesus' disciples applauded the magnificence of the Temple, they were expressing more than amazement at great architecture. The Temple was not just a building, and it was not just the home of their religious life. It was a symbol of their national identity and a reminder of the time when Israel was a free and prosperous nation under King David. When the disciples praised the Temple they were giving voice to their hope that Roman occupation would end, that a new, free Israelite nation would be established, and that they would return to the glory days of the past. You can imagine how shocked they must have been when Jesus started describing the destruction of the Temple that would surely come.

The disciples must have wondered why Jesus was so callously dashing their hopes. Perhaps they questioned his patriotism and his faith in the God who had promised to deliver God's people



from oppression. But Jesus knew that their hope was misplaced. The Temple could not save them. They would find no life by clinging to symbols of a glorious past. Jesus could see the trajectory the nation was on, and he knew that Rome would not deal kindly with rebellion. And so he challenged them to see the coming struggle and to prepare for it well. He invited them to place their hope in something that gives them a full and vibrant life event in the darkest and most painful times.

As Jesus described the destruction and suffering that would come, he also described another reality that would be at work even in the troubles. Using an image from Daniel's prophecy, he painted a picture of the victorious Messiah returning in glory to the throne room of God. He invited his friends to become aware of God's presence and life permeating their world, unaffected by the machinations of human empires and conflicts.

And then he challenged them to be careful about how they would respond to their changing world: "Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness, and by the worries of this life." Jesus knew that, when faced with turmoil, we have a tendency to numb ourselves out or get overwhelmed by our anxiety. We are very good at avoiding or denying our pain and losing ourselves in mind-altering substances or momentary experiences of pleasure. Or we allow our fear of suffering to overwhelm us to the extent that we become paralysed. But neither of these strategies lead us to life. And, since we all suffer, we all need to learn more effective ways to live fully even in the midst of our pain. But Jesus didn't just warn against letting our hearts be dulled. He offered some simple, but effective, ways to stay engaged with life even in the face of death.

The first thing Jesus recommends is that we stay alert. It doesn't help us to deny the difficulties we're facing or the disruption in our world. It is useless to embrace a blind optimism that pretends everything is fine even when it clearly isn't. What we need is to observe, listen, and take note of what is happening. We need to understand our reality in order to know how to respond well. And that takes attention and work. It requires us to avoid numbing out or freezing in fear and be intentional about staying alert so that we find the wisdom we need to navigate the chaos.

The challenge of staying alert is that it can overwhelm us when we see the truth of our situation, especially when it is extreme. And so the second strategy that Jesus recommends is to stand and look carefully for the other reality—the presence of God's reign of love and the beauty, truth, and goodness that continues to be revealed around us—in the midst of the upheaval. When we can remember that evil, violence, corruption, chaos, and death do not have the final word in our universe we can cling to hope even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. And we can resist the temptation to give in to the forces of darkness and join the polarisation, hatred, anger, and self-protectiveness that we see around us. When we stand tall and remember the Reign of Love, when we open ourselves to experience the Divine presence and goodness in our toughest times, then we free ourselves to choose a different way. We provide fuel for our hope and we empower ourselves to continue to live in grace, love, and kindness.

But Jesus also knew that we can't respond to crises in the most creative way unless we are prepared. Tragedy almost always strikes unexpectedly and we find ourselves reacting instinctively. In our pain-avoidant world it is unpopular to think about preparing for tragedy. We go through life expecting the best at all times and when turmoil comes we are surprised and convinced that something is wrong with the world. The result is that our responses to turmoil are usually thoughtless, self-protective, and shrouded in fear and negativity. But when we recognise that

suffering is an integral and even necessary part of our human existence, we can prepare ourselves for the worst before it happens. We can free ourselves from the false belief that pain shouldn't happen unless something is wrong and we can teach ourselves to slow down, consider our options, and respond with creativity, compassion, and hope.

Jesus taught that when we try to save our lives we will lose them. This is just the inevitable consequence of allowing our anxiety and fear to keep us from living fully. This is what happens when we become obsessed with protecting ourselves and defending ourselves against people and events that we perceive as threatening. But when we are willing to lose our lives—to risk living fully and releasing our self-protectiveness even when life is tough—then we remain open to hope and love. And that's when we discover that we are truly, vibrantly alive even when our eyes are filled with tears and the world around us is in chaos.

This is not easy. But neither is the alternative. It takes work to stay alert, remember our hope, and prepare well for the struggles ahead. But if we make this work part of our daily spiritual practice—as it should be in any authentic spirituality—then we will find that our longing to be alive can be richly satisfied. And that is a goal worth pursuing.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- How comfortable are you in your life right now?
- What troubles you?
- What excites you?
- What do you hope for in the coming year?
- What do you need to help you feel more deeply and vibrantly alive?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for your life that pulses in me.

Thank you for your Spirit who enlivens and empowers me.

Thank you for your desire, expressed in Jesus, for me to know abundant life.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.



LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the first Advent candle as a symbol of your commitment to cling to hope.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame and connecting with the life in your body. Be aware of your breath entering and leaving your body, your heartbeat pumping life-giving blood through your veins and arteries, the synapses in your brain giving you thought and imagination. Immerse yourself in this awareness of your aliveness—however frail or difficult it may be.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider what would help you to feel more vibrantly alive today. Make a note of that thing and set aside some time in the day to do whatever it is. At the end of the day, journal the impact that doing your life-giving activity had on you and your day.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (ADVENT SUNDAY)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

What does it mean to you to be fully alive? To what extent do you feel that you experience fullness of life?

Are you aware of a longing in you to be more vibrantly alive? What is keeping you from fullness of life? What contributes to a more meaningful life for you? How can you minimise the things that rob you of life and maximise those that add to your depth of life?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Spend some time meditating on the story of Jesus and his disciples looking at the Temple. Place yourself in the story and consider what it was like for them to look at the amazing architecture of the Temple. Then imagine their shock when Jesus told them it would all be destroyed.

What, in your life, resonates with the disciples' experience in this passage? Have there been things of great beauty and wonder that you have admired and then seen destroyed? How did that experience affect you?

Why, do you think Jesus told his disciples that it would all be destroyed? Why didn't he protect them and just allow them to enjoy the beauty?

How does being alert and aware of the realities in your world—both good and bad—help you to be more fully alive? Are there any positive experiences in your world that you could appreciate and enjoy more? Are there any negative ones that you could learn from and grow through?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Jesus taught his disciples not to let their hearts be dulled. What dulls your heart today? If necessary, make a list of the things that make you want to numb yourself out. Spend some time reflecting on these things and why they have this effect on you.

Now reflect on how you respond to these things that make you want to numb out. Do you let them dull your heart? Do you find ways to avoid feeling the feelings that these things stir up in you? What is your chosen way to numb out? How does numbing out help you? How might it be hurting you?

Is there perhaps a different way to respond to the things that tempt you to let your heart become dull? What might you do instead of numbing out?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

In his teaching about not letting our hearts be dulled Jesus mentioned two specific ways that struggle, pain, and difficulty can affect us. Both are ways to numb ourselves out and avoid dealing with the difficult realities of life. And both rob us of vibrant and meaningful life.

The first is to focus on experiences or substances that alter our moods and minds and keep us from having to deal with our pain. This doesn't have to be illegal substances. It can be food, or chocolate, or television, or music, or parties, or exercise, or a million other things. What is your favourite pain-avoiding activity or substance?

The second thing Jesus mentioned is worry. When we allow our anxiety to dominate our thoughts and feelings, it grows and takes on a life of its own. Not all worry is destructive. We do need to worry to protect ourselves from danger. But when worry becomes irrational or all-consuming it no longer protects us and it begins to hurt us. Do you have any toxic or destructive worry in your life?

How can you resist allowing these two responses to pain to control you today? What can you do to keep your heart from becoming numb?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The first strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was for us to stay alert. This is about taking the realities of our world and our lives seriously. Seeing things for what they are and not trying to deny reality. It is only in staying alert that we can understand our world and what we need to do to navigate it well. This alertness brings wisdom and leads us to a richer more meaningful life.

What does it mean for you to stay alert? In what ways are you already living with alertness? Where do you struggle to be alert?

What is your response to Jesus' call to stay alert? Does it help you or does it make you anxious? How could being more alert help you to be more fully alive? If it is helpful you may want to list in your journal the ways alertness can help you.

What can you do to nurture a healthy alertness? Make a note in your journal.

DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The second strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was to stay aware of God's Presence and Reign. We need to be alert to what is happening in the world. But we also need to remember that there is another reality at work too. The Spirit is always present and active even in the turmoil of our world.

What does it mean for you to stay aware of God's presence and activity in your life? Where do you see Spirit at work today? What beauty, truth, and goodness can you enjoy today? How can you draw strength, courage, and hope from your awareness of God's Reign?

Make a list in your journal of all the ways you sense God's Spirit being present and working in your life today.

DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The third strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was to be prepared. Or to put it in a way that we often speak of: be prepared for the worst but hope for the best. It can be tempting to believe that we can avoid pain and difficulty in this life. But no one gets through a human life without scars. And so we can prepare ourselves to cope with struggles even before we know what they may be. And one way to do that is to learn to risk living fully even though we know we will sometimes get hurt.

How can you nurture your preparedness to face pain and suffering in healthy ways? What strategies have you used in the past that have helped you? What strategies haven't been helpful?

What would it mean for you to risk living fully even though you will get hurt sometimes? What does living fully look like for you in this context? How can you prepare yourself to live more fully even when things are difficult for you?

Spend some time journaling your thoughts.