

When Life Tempts you away from the Manger

By Heather Renshaw (article found on catholicmom.com)



Are you struggling to wrap your brain around the fact that Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent (*Hey – I just barely digested my Thanksgiving leftovers, people!*)? You are not alone in your disbelief and bewilderment, my friend. Welcome to the Land of ***So. Much. To. Do. And. Yet. So. Very. Little. Time. In. Which. To. Do. It.***

As a follower of Christ awaiting His birth, it seems that something is consistently – and sometimes quite violently – working to pull my focus away from the birth of Our Lord and to nearly anything else that catches my eye or demands my attention. Instead of peace, I feel uneasy. Instead of expectant hope, I feel overwhelmed and discouraged. Rather than taking more time for reflective prayer and meditation, I'm tempted to panic by the sheer volume of endless to-do lists that seemingly spontaneously give birth to even more lists.

What's going on here?

Consider: We are moving toward the most spectacularly precious time of the year, when the words of John 3:16 become reality. We are reminded of how lavishly our Heavenly Father loves us – that He truly did send His only Son into the world so that we might be saved.

At Christmas, the prophecies are fulfilled: a Light has come into the world ... the Son of God takes on human flesh and dwells among us ... the face of God is visible to His people and we do not perish. And, in the moment of His birth, everything – truly everything – changes.

Is it any wonder, then, that the enemy of our souls seeks to distract, overwhelm, and undermine our journey to the manger at this precise time of year?

Satan will do anything and everything in his power to steal our peace (and faith, and joy, and hope) this Advent and Christmas season, my friends, because he wants to keep us as far as possible from that manger.

He doesn't want us to behold the Divine Baby in solemn adoration and be changed from the inside out. He doesn't want us to have a personal encounter with the Most High God, waiting meekly for us in the hay. Lucifer may be called the Father of Lies, but even he knows it is Truth

Himself Who awaits us in Bethlehem: the King of Kings and Lord of Lords *in the flesh*, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

At times like this, I cling to gentle reminders of what this Advent season is really about:

It's not about showcasing Pinterest-worthy wreaths or calendars; it's about heralding the arrival of the King.

It's not about reading magnificent Christmas stories to our children; it's about listening to the Author of Life Who is come into the world.

It's not about baking delectable desserts that dazzle our senses and delight our Instagram followers; it's about the miraculous Word Made Flesh and receiving Him worthily in the Eucharist.

It's not about giving and receiving invitations to fabulous holiday parties; it's about readying the way for our King and preparing to celebrate His birth.

It's not about getting everyone to look at the camera for a Facebook-ready greeting card; it's about examining our lives and preparing a place for the Savior to be born in our hearts.

It's not about buying the perfect gifts for those we love; it's about making a perfectly humble gift of our very selves to the Baby on His birthday, as flawed and imperfect as we are.

Don't get me wrong – none of the above is sinful or wrong in and of themselves – we *should* enjoy the many treasures of life and love and community this time of year allows; however, if we're focused more on the stuff of this world than the stuff of our Savior this season, it's time to stop down, step back, and reassess our priorities.

Can you see the manger, my friend?

Do you see the baby?

Do you see Our Lord?

He is waiting.



What is keeping you away from the manger this Advent season, dear one? Ask our Heavenly friends – the saints and angels (especially your Guardian Angel!) – to keep your eyes and efforts fixed upon Him Who is to come.

What is Advent?

by Mark Hart (article found at lifeteen.com)

Hide-and-seek was my favorite game growing up. The strategy of securing the perfect hiding place, the frantic scurry to hide, the thrill of the count, holding my breath as I heard the seeker getting closer ... it was almost too much pressure for my little heart to take.

The lessons learned in hide-and-seek are lessons we can carry with us throughout life: the ability to think under pressure, the integrity to not look while counting, the self-control in remaining silent for long periods of time as well as the pure joy of playing a game with friends, just to name a few.

Too often, however, I treat my relationship with God like a game of hide-and-seek. I run and try to hide from Him (as if He cannot see me!). At times I even hold my breath and don't talk to Him. I figure that if He can't find me, He can't ask me to change.

There's just one problem with that thought process: We can't hide from God.

To God everything is exposed: all of our faults, imperfections, personal secrets but also all of our talents, traits, successes and achievements ... that's the good news. The even better news is that God is always seeking you and me.

'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

That is one of reasons why the Church gives us the season of Advent. Over the four weeks preceding Christmas, we prepare not just for Jesus' coming as a baby in a manger but also for His Second Coming. The word Advent means 'to come,' and the Church, with great wisdom, nudges us with a 'wake-up call' to ensure that we are honest with our God and in right relationship with Him before He comes again.

God is seeking you. Are you hiding from Him? If not, good. If so, stop. You have no reason to hide yourself from Him.

He loves us even more than we love ourselves, so let Him. He's coming back at some point. The fact is only scary if we're not where we need to be in our relationship to God. A relationship with Jesus is all fun without any of the games.

Advent is a beautiful gift, so seek God and make the season one of depth and of honesty. Expose your soul before God and allow Him to love you for who you truly are: a sinner in need of His mercy, a work in progress.

As hide-and-seek reminds us, 'Ready or not, here He comes.'

'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?' Psalm 139:7

When we have to trust that a barn is best



Photo by Tiago Muraro via Unsplash (2015). Imaged edited and text added by Erin Franco.

By Erin Franco (article found at humblehandmaid.com)

During most of Advent this year, my thoughts kept returning to what God *didn't* provide for Mary at the birth of her son.

He didn't provide her with a birth that would happen before she had to leave with Joseph for Bethlehem. He didn't provide her with the surety that she wouldn't have her baby *on the road* to Bethlehem. He didn't provide her with a clean, warm, private hotel room where she could give birth. He didn't provide her with an experienced midwife to coach her through labor and delivery. After Jesus' birth, Joseph moved the family hastily to a foreign land where they had to live indefinitely, knew no one, and had to start from scratch.

If Mary models the trust in God that we should have, then her story is a gamechanger. How many times do we wonder why God is letting something be so uncomfortable and difficult for us?

My feeble mind can only guess at all of the "whys" in the Nativity story. Maybe Mary and Joseph badly needed the unity that would come from relying on one another during the birth experience. Maybe Mary needed to learn how to trust Joseph more. Maybe if they had found an inn to stay in, they would not have had the dignity of privacy during labor. Maybe they would have picked up some disease for that matter. Maybe Herod's soldiers would have easily found the holy family during the massacre of the innocents.

God's ways are so far above our ways. I am so glad that I have Mary's story to pray with when I wonder why God has sometimes provided my own struggles with a barn, rather than a four-star hotel.

Back when we lived with my parents for two years, for two Christmases in a row I thought, *Surely, it is good and right and appropriate that my family have a home of our own again very soon. Surely it would be terribly harmful for my marriage to live for another six months—another year—with my parents. Surely, our young children need an intentional family culture that we cannot fully implement without our own space.* It was a hard pill to swallow those two years, the pill that says *this is somehow best for me and my family.*

Here are bits and pieces of things I believe God has done with those challenging two years of my life.

He refined my marriage in fire. Oh-my-goodness...if you knew. (And still, *still* we are in need of much grace and growth!)

He gave my marriage our involvement in the Domestic Church, a gift that we wouldn't have been open to without a desperate season.

He gave my husband and I an incredibly open, trusting, strong relationship with my parents (yes, even after two years of living with them. All by God's grace.)

He taught me what it looks like, feels like, and *is actually like* to surrender daily to His will.

He taught me to appreciate my three living children more.

He gave me life experience. Schooling me in perspective has helped me to empathize more with others.

He has taught me a little of how to suffer like a saint.

He taught me that my hope will never be disappointed, as long as my hopes are His hopes, rather than my own.

He gave me another story to tell, and he gave me unexpected new opportunities to share it on my blog, a new podcast, and an upcoming radio show.

But it's not about me being strong after what I've been through. And it's not about God never giving you more than you can handle. And in fact, I believe that's a harmful and deeply flawed way to think about suffering. No, contrary to popular culture and pump-you-up Facebook memes with images of marathon runners gritting their teeth as they run off into the sunset, suffering isn't meant to harden us or make us find our supernatural inner strength.

I think that suffering is meant to make us realize how weak we are, how much we need Him, how much He loves us, and most importantly, *how much He can do with us, through us, and despite us.*

Who can ever know how God has woven all things together for our good? Who can ever fathom His ways? Yet, I do not think it is wrong to try and piece together bits and pieces of what He may have been doing with our suffering. Those consoling glimpses into God's plan are the stuff of witness. The very strongest witnesses I have heard are stories of the impossibly perfect weavings of His grace in the midst of shocking, even scandalous suffering and circumstances. Just look at the story of the teenage Jewish virgin who gave birth to the King of Kings...in a barn.

Advent Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Master of both the light
and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon
our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do
seek quiet spaces to
hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious
over many things
look forward to
your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways
long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy
seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people,
walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.

To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"
Amen.

Henri J.M. Nouwen

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