

FOREVER EMBODIED



AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL ON THE
ABSOLUTELY WILD REALITY OF THE
INCARNATION AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR
THE SPIRITUALITY OF OUR BODIES

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INTRODUCTION



Dear Reader,

I have spent the better part of a year dwelling on the spirituality of embodiment, and Christmas seems like the perfect time to start writing about it.

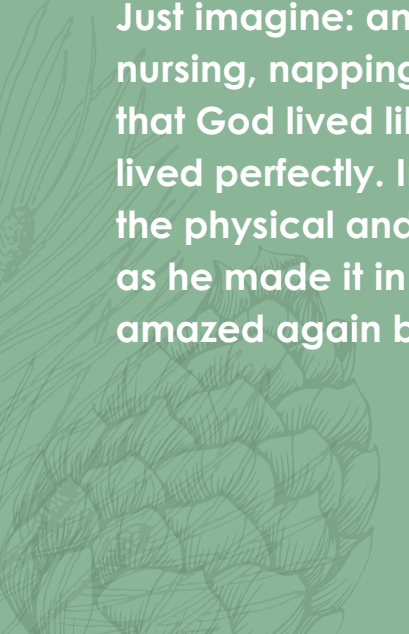
The incarnation is the startling affirmation of the body in a world where we seem hellbent on ignoring it. This might be secular materialism. It might be misguided spiritualism. But the human condition is to sideline the gift of flesh that houses the thing called *you*.

Yet, Christianity stands as the most pro-body religion to have ever graced the earth, announcing to all of us that the bones and flesh that make us are not accidental, they are not lowly, they are not incidental; they are by design.

We are the pinnacle of God's creation, male and female bodies that together bear out this mystery we call the image of God.

In the Christmas season, Christians take up our annual call to make all the world's philosophies blush by proclaiming that God took a body! One like ours.

Just imagine: an infant gestating in the womb, passing through a woman, nursing, napping, and needing just like us. In the incarnation, we proclaim that God lived like us, with colds and flus and hunger and puberty; and yet lived perfectly. In the incarnation, we make a theological examination of the physical and find that God tried on matter and found it to be as Good as he made it in the beginning. Thus we proclaim (even as we are amazed again by the strangeness of what we say), that God loves bodies.



INTRODUCTION



Christmas then, is the perfect season to admit that we cannot be more spiritual than God. If we are to become like him, then we too must unabashedly embrace these image-bearing miracles he gave us called bodies.

So this Advent devotional walks us through a spiritual examination of our bodies. With 24 devotions on the incarnation and the spirituality of embodiment, we will proclaim through breathing and sleeping and eating and thinking and more, that our bodies are the most spiritual thing we have. They are good, they are loved by God, and even in all the ways they are so obviously broken, they WILL be redeemed.

In what follows, be prepared to practice being embodied. Each devotion will come with a scripture, a meditation for reflection, a prayer for praying through the day, and a physical practice to carry through advent.

God bless your body and the body of your loved ones as we celebrate the Christmas gift of God's body given for us.

With hope,
Justin Whitmel Earley

DAY 1: BODY + SPIRIT = SOUL

SCRIPTURE

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." – Genesis 2:7

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." – John 1:14

MEDITATE

One of the most astounding claims of Christianity is that God has a body. What's even more astounding is how central the body of God has been to Christianity's faith and tradition: one of our largest holidays is Christmas, where we celebrate the idea that God became enfleshed. This means that material, enfleshed bodies like the one you have right now are central to the Christian understanding of spirituality. And in fact, this has always been true.

At the beginning of the Christian story, we find a God who delights in making the material world. Who makes stars and lights, oceans and grass, birds and trees and calls them "Good! Good! Good!" The pinnacle of this creation narrative, of course, is you and me. God makes the bodies of Adam and Eve and calls them very good. But notice exactly how this happens.

In Genesis 2:7, God takes "dust from the ground" and breathes the "breath of life" into it. In the Hebrew, this word for dust is *aphar*, the idea of organic matter, and the word for breath we see all over the scriptures, *ruach*, the idea of the breath of God. So it is God combining body plus spirit which creates "a living soul", as Genesis calls it. In other words, you are a divine combination of materiality and spirituality and God intended it that way. This has incredibly practical implications. Your soul is not some other part of you, it is the fact of your body animated by spirit. Neither is your body some dispensable part of you that is less spiritual than your spirit. You don't need to get away from your body to some more spiritual place to experience God. No, Christianity tells us that God made our bodies and called them "Good!" Your body is the beginning of all spirituality.

PRACTICE

Much of this Christmas season, you may be tempted to think that the world is too materialistic. But what if the world actually isn't materialistic enough? We were never meant to love the world more than we love God. But we are supposed to love it as He does. Indeed, God made it all, loves it all, and intends to redeem it all. What if the way to see the world as God sees it isn't to look away stuff, but to look through it to see Him. Begin today with your body, by looking at it and saying what God says: "This is good."

PRAY

(With a hand somewhere on your body)

Inhale: God, you made my body...

Exhale: ... may I honor You with it.

From 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...

DAY 2: INHALE

SCRIPTURE

"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." – Psalm 103:13-14

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God." – Psalm 42:1

MEDITATE

Yesterday we looked at how the breath of God lies at the center of our body/spirit union. Today and tomorrow, we will explore how inhaling and exhaling are twin sides of this fascinating coin.

A central theme through the scriptures is the breath of God as the spirit of life. Breath in the Old Testament is basically synonymous with the Spirit of God or of life. At the beginning of Genesis, the Spirit hovering over the waters is the word "ruach" (רוּחַ), which means wind, breath, or spirit. When God gives life to Adam, he breathes into him, this is the verb form of God's breath, neshamah (נְשָׁמָה). In the New Testament, the Greek word pneuma (πνεῦμα) is used for the Holy Spirit, again connoting the wind and breath of God.

So it is in Christian theology. Air itself is seen as an image for the gift and presence of God. As we consider our bodies as images of God, we can see right away that there is something spiritual in the fact that we were made to constantly inhale.

As image bearers, we are a fascinating combination of likeness and unlikeness to God. In some ways we are startlingly powerful, in others, we are amazingly dependent. With every inhale, we express the frailer half of our image. It is our central human need.

Try even holding your breath for a minute now as you read, it is incredibly difficult. Within only moments the need for air becomes suddenly urgent. And as it turns out, the technical cause of death in our bodies is always the lack of oxygen to some key part of our body such as heart or brain tissue. Breath is life, physically and spiritually. Our desperate need for breath is of course a physical reflection of our desperate spiritual need for the spirit (remember this is the word for breath!) of God.

Note that on the cross, Jesus gave up breath on our behalf, and commended himself back to the spirit (breath) of God. Our inhaling bodies are rich with spiritual metaphor. Because each breath is an opportunity to remember our spiritual need for God, Christians throughout history have used breath as a physical way of prayer.

PRACTICE

Breath prayers have been a practice of Christians for the history of the church, and because breath prayers are such a beautiful way to encounter the spiritual-physical union of our bodies and souls, this devotional will offer a daily breath prayer. My encouragement is to spend a minute or two praying each prayer using your breath. The typical way to do this is to inhale slowly while praying the first line, then hold your breath for a moment, exhale slowly while praying the second line, and then pause for a moment before repeating. In this way breath prayer becomes a physical practice of box breathing (a classic way to calm and train your body) as much as a way of prayer. Begin by breath praying this prayer:

PRAY

Inhale: Spirit of God...

Exhale: ... I need you more than air.

From Acts 17:28 - For in him we live and move and have our being...

DAY 3: EXHALE

SCRIPTURE

“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.” – Genesis 2:19-20

MEDITATE

Jesus is often called the word made flesh. In other words, he is the logos, or the wisdom of God embodied. We read that Jesus has the words of life, and by his word he both calms storms, casts out demons, and calls the dead to rise. To say the least, his speech is mighty, and Jesus' way of speaking says something about our capacity to use our breath on purpose.

If our need to inhale shows our dependence, our capacity to exhale shows the other half of our divine image. This is the mighty half.

Consider that in exhaling, we do something very God-like: we give breath back to the world. As God offered his spirit of life, so we return air to the world in a way that is useful. All of nature needs the carbon dioxide that we give.

But even more, we probably bear the most significant part of the divine image as we exhale in speech. Note that God's opening act of creation was to speak the world into existence. Recall that Adam's first task was to be like God and name the world. Through the exhale of speech, God and Adam created order and goodness in the world.

So it is with our divine capacity to speak. Like God we shape the world in speech. This is why the Bible insists over and over that our speech is powerful. It can be used for great good or great evil. It is the crown of our image, our ability to breathe on purpose. With it we encourage, we lift up, we speak love, we sing, we work, we organize. We are, in all seriousness, astounding with what we do with our breath.

PRACTICE

Find an opportunity today to speak words of encouragement and love to someone. Whether a co-worker or neighbor or family member, use your breath as God did, to create life.

PRAY

Inhale: Encourage me...

Exhale: ... to encourage others.

From 1 Thessalonians 5:11 - Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up...

DAY 4: GARDENING SHALOM IN THE MIND

SCRIPTURE

"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?" – Psalm 42:5

"But we have the mind of Christ." – 1 Corinthians 2:16

MEDITATE

Modern neuroscience has taught us so much about God's gift we call the brain, but probably paramount amongst all our learnings has been the divided or partitioned nature of the brain. There are many halves to marvel at. It is our individual brain, but it is formed socially. It is divided into left and right, and upper and lower. It resides in the safest part of our body, the skull, but also extends through the body in the spine and nerves. Even its plasticity is a balance of two halves: the brain both holds its shape and it changes shape.

The beauty of all of this is how it works together when it's working right. But in broken bodies after the fall, the curse of all of this is that we get disintegrated. In fact, one of the primary ways psychologists describe mental unhealth is disintegration. When the parts of our brain are out of balance, we experience mental suffering.

Now, consider that one of the classic ways theologians describe the effects of the fall in creation is the breakdown of *shalom* (meaning a holistic and integrated peace). All of this suggests a through line between our interior lives and the exterior world. As the world longs for shalom, so does our body and mind. As Christ seeks to bring all things to completion, so we long for him to bring our mental life to completion. As we groan with a world in waiting, so our minds groan with the pangs of separation. But just as the call of Adam and Eve was to garden Eden towards shalom, so part of our call is to cultivate shalom in the garden of our minds. We do this ever as we wait for Jesus, the true Gardener, to bring final renewal to our brains.

This is to say that all the mental health you long for, is valid. You long for it for a reason. Because your mind was not made to spark in panic attacks, or to sputter out into depression. Your lower brain was not made to sound alarm sirens when your upper brain is telling you things are OK. As the garden of the world needs a gardener to bring it to shalom, so do our minds. The tragedy is that the garden of our minds is fallen. But the beauty is that we can still garden! God has built grace into the mind in the form of neuroplasticity!

Christ is our ultimate example of this. Though he suffered in a fallen world of disintegration just as we do, he also showed us how to cultivate courage, joy, peace, and mental strength through times of suffering, doubt, and sadness.

Christ's coming in the flesh of a brain is an astounding encouragement to us—this thing that is the center of all our thought *shall* be redeemed. In the meantime, we garden it with the logos made flesh (the truth) and also with the practices of healthy living (as gardeners of shalom).

PRACTICE

Garden your mind today by practicing one of the rhythms of Jesus: silence. Over and over, science shows that one of the healthiest things for our brain is to simply be quiet. Just to be still and reflect. Take five minutes in silence to meditate on the integrated mind of Christ. (Ideally, do this while breathing the breath prayer for five minutes.)

PRAY

Inhale: Spirit of God...

Exhale: ... grant me peace.

From Philippians 4:7 - And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding...

DAY 5: THE GIFT OF SPIRITUAL HABIT

SCRIPTURE

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” – Romans 12:1-2

MEDITATE

Part of the divide we read about yesterday is the upper and lower brain. The lower can churn along in habit, while the upper does its complex acrobatics. This is God’s gift, until it’s fallen. In our fallen minds, the gift of habit can become a curse. We can “know” the right thing in our upper brain, but by habit, do something else as our lower brain follows its bad patterns.

As we seek the integration of shalom, we do not just want to know the truth of Christ, we want to practice it in habit. It’s one thing to “know” God loves you, but even the demons “know” things about God. (James 2:19) It’s another thing to habitually meditate on the scriptures in such a way that their truths sink down to your lower brain and you intuit that love. We see in the life of Jesus this redemption of the divided brain. Jesus holds to both halves of the brain without paradox. He does not balk at the need for truth. (John 17:17) He does not balk at the need for practice. (Mark 1:35)

This is why Jesus calls us to a way of life and belief, not just one or the other. (Matthew 7:24-27) Note that assuming one or the other (we’re only head and belief—or we’re only life and practice) is a denial of the fullness of the incarnation. We’re not Gnostics! The incarnation proves that. We strenuously deny any claim that the true life is the “spiritual” life and we must escape this world to get there. But we’re also not reductive materialists! We believe in the reality of spirit apart from the flesh, and our need for a renewed life of faith in order to have a renewed life of practice.

What’s true for marriage is true for the body: what God has brought together, let no man separate. Do not separate head and habit. Do not separate body and soul. Remember that separating the two (literally speaking) is death, and any philosophical separation of the two is a theology of death. But Christ is the logos, the word made flesh, a living theology of life. Follow him, in body and soul and in head and habit.

PRACTICE

The habit of scripture before phone is a wonderful way to combine upper brain truth with lower brain habit. This practice seeks the truth of scripture while resisting the habits of idolatry that stem from our scrolling. By doing so, it honors the need for both halves of the brain to be following Christ. For the rest of Advent, try practicing the habit of not looking at your phone in the morning until after you’ve spent some time in scripture. (Perhaps just don’t open your phone until after you’ve read each morning’s devotional.)

PRAY

Inhale: Lord Jesus...

Exhale: ... renew my mind.

From Romans 12:1-2 - Do not conform to the pattern of this world...

DAY 6: WORSHIP IS EMBODIED

SCRIPTURE

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." – Hebrews 10:24-25

MEDITATE

The incarnation amplifies one of the themes that is present throughout the scriptures: we were made to worship in body and spirit. That is to say, the physical way we worship is significant. The Old Testament is obviously insistent on this, as it proclaims over and over that there is a way in which Israel must worship.

While the New Testament opens this way of worship to all through the person of Jesus, it doesn't make it any less embodied. In fact, the incarnation turns up the volume on this theme by insisting that God embraces the goodness of embodied life. One way we can explore the significance of this is by singing in worship.

Consider the fact that singing is all over scripture, and that singing is different from reading. It could be the case that we were just meant to read words of truth silently. Or perhaps hear them proclaimed and explained. But no, in the tradition of God's people, it is good but not enough to read about God's goodness, it is good but not enough to explain and expound on it in sermons. The people of God are called to *sing* about it.

What an embodied task! To take words of truth and set them to melody. To join voices with others and sync our rhythms. To create careful harmonies and instrumentation. Singing in worship is an ode to embodiment. We lift hands, we hear noises, we sway, we exhale, we sync with other bodies in the union that worshiping the triune God brings. Unsurprisingly, psychologists have identified a phenomenon called "entrainment" in which the physiology of bodies sync in all kinds of fascinating and meaningful ways when we sing together.

For Christians, singing together is not just the result of our community, it is also the cause of it.

PRACTICE

Part of the Christmas season is the delight of singing the Christmas hymns. While I implore you to dwell on the words, I also exhort you to delight in the melodies, the gift of instrumentation, the joy of hearing a choir proclaim the birth of Christ, and the common grace of entertainment with those you love as you sing together. For that reason, each Saturday of this devotion will explore a Christmas hymn and the embodied aspects of it. The first will be tomorrow, perhaps you can explore signing it at the top of your lungs. For today, your practice is simply to pick your favorite Christmas hymn and enjoy it at full volume.

PRAY

Inhale: *I sing to the Lord...*

Exhale: *... for He has done glorious things.*

From Isaiah 12:5 - Sing to the Lord, for He has done glorious things...

DAY 7: JOY TO THE WORLD

MEDITATE

Below are the original lyrics to *Joy to the World*, a hymn that positively resounds with the goodness of the body and creation. You may have heard this hymn a thousand times, but I encourage you to read through it carefully through the eyes of the incarnation.

This hymn expects that the incarnation is good news for the world of "Nature," including the "fields and rocks and hills and plains." In other words, all of creation rejoices at the coming of Jesus. And further, everything is redeemed by it. Joy to the world acknowledges that all the thorns of sin infest the world, but also proclaim that Jesus is going to redeem it all "as far as the curse is found."

Finally, this is good news for all humanity. Joy to the world has no small vision. The song announces that the world, our lives and governments and nations will all be renewed by the incarnation of Jesus. This is truly good news, and worth singing very loud about to say the least.

**JOY TO THE WORLD: THE LORD IS COME;
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING;
LET EV'RY HEART PREPARE HIM ROOM,
AND HEAV'N AND NATURE SING.**

**JOY TO THE EARTH, THE SAVIOR REIGNS,
LET MEN THEIR SONGS EMPLOY,
WHILE FIELDS AND FLOODS, ROCKS, HILLS AND PLAINS,
REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY.**

**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.**

**HE RULES THE WORLD WITH TRUTH AND GRACE,
AND MAKES THE NATIONS PROVE
THE GLORIES OF HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS,
AND WONDERS OF HIS LOVE.**

DAY 8: TECHNOLOGY & THE TEMPTATION TO DISEMBOIMENT

SCRIPTURE

“The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”
– Genesis 2:18

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us.’)” – Matthew 1:23

MEDITATE

The incarnation is God’s resounding confirmation that presence is at the center of all things. Remember that we were made in the garden to be with God and others. Remember that this is what we lost in the fall. Recall that this is the story of the Old Testament; God trying to be with his people. And the incarnation is the pinnacle of this. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. In other words, the incarnation signals the life we were made for—to be with God and with the people of God. And yet how often are our screens the reason we are around other people but not with them.

Remember that this concept is not locational. God is omnipresent. He is always “here” in the technical sense. But our attention to him is the medium of presence. Our attention to others is the medium of love.

In an age of technology, the constant temptation is to split ourselves. We believe we can have our bodies in one place and our attention in another. But by doing so we end up no place at all, and sacrifice that central gift our bodies have to give: presence.

The art of learning to be present and pay attention is a precious virtue to reclaim in our modern moment.

PRACTICE

Spend an hour with your phone off this evening, and soak in the presence of someone you love. Lavish them with your attention, knowing that when you give your eyes to someone you give them the incarnational gift of God: presence. Consider making an hour off each day a habitual practice of incarnational presence through the whole season of Advent.

PRAY

Inhale: Immanuel...

Exhale: ... You are with us.

From Matthew 1:23 - The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son...

DAY 9: NO PHONE WHILE WAITING

SCRIPTURE

“Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” – Psalm 27:14

MEDITATE

Technology is not only the reason for our interrupted presence, it is also the reason that we have no ability to wait. But Christian spirituality calls us to wait. A lot, actually.

The incarnation in the story of God is a two part announcement, it's both the announcement that the Kingdom has come, but also the announcement that we have to wait for it to come in full.

This, to say the least, is difficult. But it also makes so much sense of Jesus' teachings. The plant is growing, but slowly. The time is imminent, but not quite yet. We are to rejoice in the coming wedding, but also wait for it to start.

We humans don't like waiting, and technology has not helped that. We now distract ourselves from the pain of waiting at every turn. But in doing so we pull ourselves away from one of the central practices of the Christian life: to learn to wait.

Consider how close this is to all spirituality: to wait with patience while a loved one suffers. To wait with hope while a child is in a difficult stage. To wait with faith while a teen drifts from the faith. To wait with joy while the world struggles in the desperate suffocation of suffering. In all of this, we are a counter-cultural people, believing that what we see is not all that is but insisting that we have to wait for it to be made well.

What is more Christian than to learn to wait?

PRACTICE

I encourage you to lean into the art of waiting by practicing “no phone while waiting” for the rest of Advent. This means resist the urge to check your phone while in pick-up lines, at stop lights, in elevators, before meetings start, or wherever else you find yourself waiting. Instead, use those moments of waiting to practice the prayer below and simply breathe and wait.

PRAY

Inhale: *Lord, as I wait...*

Exhale: *... draw near to me.*

From James 4:8 - Come near to God and He will come near to you...

(Consider also listening to the song 'Come Light Our Hearts' by Sandra McCracken which dwells on waiting.)

DAY 10: FIGHTING FOR EMBODIMENT

SCRIPTURE

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” – Matthew 22:37-40

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” – 1 Corinthians 10:31

MEDITATE

The incarnation is the great rebuke to our technological dreams of virtual reality, for into such a world the body of Christ in the flesh comes crashing.

It may be helpful to see how similar we are to the gnostic views of Jesus' day. At the time of Jesus, the Gnostics were already preaching that there was a way out of this world. It might be meditation, it might be discipline, it might be wisdom or drinking or something else. Then and now, everywhere you look you can find a cheap philosophy promising escape from the tedious problems of physical reality.

In our technological moment, we have our own. Visions of meta-realities, virtual worlds and artificial intelligence. I hope I comfort you when I say this with all confidence: God is not worried. He might even be giggling a bit. At least in the sense a parent does when he sees his child trying to eat the toy hammer he gave him: “No child, don't use it like that. Here's what it's for...”

Everywhere we look, we have room to let the incarnation disrupt our technological visions. And remember, this doesn't mean technology is bad. Quite the opposite. Life and creation is good! The incarnation proves it. It simply means that all technology is a gift when it leads to love of God and others, and a curse when it leads to avoiding God and separating us from others.

In the same way, the incarnation is the gift of a good God who is patient and loving even in our technological idolatries. “No child,” he laughs, “the world is not for escaping your embodied relationships with each other, it's for enjoying them.” So in the theology of the incarnation, rejoice that you can read this digital PDF, or that you have a printer to print it on. Celebrate that you can text a friend a note today, and revel in the fact you can video chat with a family member during the holiday season.

But also be wary of anything and everything that tempts you to live in an isolated virtual world, and run as fast as you can from it. If a social media platform keeps you looking at videos all day instead of being with your family, in the spirit of the incarnation, delete it! If a website keeps you imagining a life other than the one you actually have, in the hope of Jesus made flesh, run from it. God came to give us embodied life, and all technology must fall in line with that gift.

PRACTICE

At the end, what we want is not just each other's words, we want each other! In this season, lean all your use of technology toward embodiment. Rather than text, send a voice memo. Rather than voice memo, call. Or perhaps rather than call, video chat. Or maybe, show up in person! Whatever it is, try to push more in this season of Advent towards a life that celebrates the gift of embodiment.

PRAY

Inhale: In all I do...

Exhale: ... may I bring glory to You.

From 1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do...

DAY 11: OUR FALLEN BODIES

SCRIPTURE

"To Adam [God] said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." – Genesis 3:17-19

MEDITATE

Perhaps you have been becoming angrier and angrier or sadder and sadder as you've read this devotion. Something in you is boiling up and saying, but my body doesn't work right! Sadly, I want to affirm this.

So much of our daily physical life is not in the glory of the body as the miracle of God's image. It's not in the hope of the incarnation as the sign of life to come: it's in the misery of fallenness. And this is unfortunately as true as you think it is.

One of the truest (and most obvious) lessons of the Bible is that the world is broken. It is not as it was meant to be. In describing the fall, the poet John Milton wrote that "Earth trembled from her entrails... in pangs...Nature gave a second groan." This is an image of cosmic sickness and pain, because the Christian theology of the fall is that everything good (including our bodies) is ransacked and ruined. Milton even describes the effects of sin as a "wound." And this rings true.

Much, if not most, of our experience in the body is of its senseless pain, its constant sickness, its intractable injuries, and its slow march towards inevitable death.

Part of the lesson of the incarnation is that God did not avoid this difficult truth, he walked courageously into it.

So should we then. For today at least, we do not try to make sense of it. We do not try to rationalize it. We simply look at it for what it is: our bodies are abused and broken by the fall. Like the effects of sin, it is part our fault, and another part tragedy of what has been done to us. In either case, we simply mourn it.

PRACTICE

As painful as it may be, take this time to acknowledge in prayer the things in the world that are broken. Unfortunately, they are abundant. Today *thousands* of babies will be aborted. Even more children will be abused. Cancer victims will die without the ability to speak or say goodbye. Wars rage on. Today millions, perhaps like you, will suffer from pains they cannot locate, allergies they cannot solve, sleeplessness they cannot fix, anxieties they cannot kick, depression they cannot lift, and diseases we cannot cure. The world is very broken and so are our bodies. For today, naming that and knowing that God names it too, is enough.

PRAY

Inhale: Lord Jesus...

Exhale: ...have mercy on us.

From Psalm 51:1-2: Have mercy on me, O God...

DAY 12: ON LAMENT AND CRYING

SCRIPTURE

"When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept." – John 11:32-35

MEDITATE

Yesterday we saw that the incarnation courageously stares into the difficulty of living an embodied life in our fallen world. Today, we ask, what do we do with that? When we look to the body of Jesus for an answer, we find a most curious one: we cry.

We weep. Apparently, before anything else, God in human form thought death and sickness was worth weeping over. And what volumes this says about our task as embodied people.

Have you ever considered that when we cry, it is visible? Why is it this way? God could have made it so that we cry internally. He could have made tears come out of our hands that we could hide in our pockets. But no, when we cry we weep tears from our eyes that all can see. This is the physiology of community.

Our laments invite others in. And this says a lot about lament. We are not alone with it. First, because Jesus weeps with us. Consider, brother or sister, that you have never wept alone. Not once. Jesus has always been there with you. You think you are worried over your mother's cancer? He weeps over it. You think you are wracked with your memories of a painful childhood? He weeps for you. Or perhaps you try to stuff your pain down and hide it, perhaps you ignore it though it keeps popping up in odd places. But God does not. He cries over you, because he longs for you to be whole and well with more hope than you dare take up.

With tears in his eyes, Jesus embodies what the Bible teaches us—God is a God who laments the brokenness. He laments it more than we do, before we do, and long after we do. Whatever concern you have, he holds it beside you, and he wants to hear about it from you.

So take the incarnation of Jesus' tears as a sign of permission to state your pain. Emmanuel is with you. He cries for you. In holding out his arms on the cross he offers you a place for your hurt. In his embrace, wounded bodies come together in weeping.

PRACTICE

Most of us are no good at lamenting. We think it complaining. We think it weak. We think it unhelpful. We think a lot of things that are not true at all. Today, in light of the God who cries for you and all you have lost, I encourage you to lament. Write down today what hurts you. Or perhaps just cry on the page. Go ahead, you may. Circle your tears with the blurred ink of your pen as a small sign that God has not lost one of them. Psalm 56:8 says he has recorded our misery and kept track of our tears. For he is the one teaching that if the world is really as good as he made it, then it's worth crying over too.

PRAY

Inhale: Lord Jesus...

Exhale: ...weep with me.

From John 11:35 - Jesus wept.

DAY 13: THERE'S HOPE FOR OUR BODIES

SCRIPTURE

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." – Revelation 21:4

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." – Romans 5:1-5

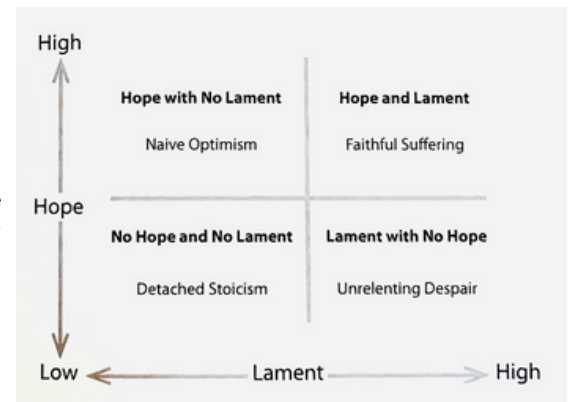
MEDITATE

Yesterday we explored lament, which might seem odd in the Christmas season, but Advent is the place of our waiting. And yet, it is also the season of our hope! Here is the beautiful fullness of Christianity, that in the dark we see the light more clearly, and in the pain we find hope more fully.

Christmas is the season of our hope precisely because the incarnation refuses to paper over our sin and brokenness. Instead, Christmas insists on its redemption. Consider what good news this is! Consider why we shout about peace and hope and joy in all the carols we sing. Because truly, the incarnation is good news. A little diagram might help.

This is from Kelly Kapic's wonderful book called *Embodied Hope*, and it helps illustrate how when we ignore lament and hope, we live in a detached world of stoicism, there is neither pain nor joy. But when we lament without hope, we find the world of nihilism: there is only darkness and no light. And yet still, hope without lament is perhaps the most offensive of all, for it is a naïve optimism that ignores the pain. Only in the full-throated declaration of the incarnation do we find hope and lament right alongside each other. A God who faces the pain of death and yet rises from the ashes in resurrection.

It is not for nothing that we sing about hope in the Christmas season, for here is the hope of a world made new. Yesterday we lamented all the things wrong with our bodies, but I want you now to take all of that truth, and hold it up in the light of God's hope: You will not always be sick. You will not always hurt. Death will not reign in your story or mine, for Jesus is making all things new. Perhaps we will see his miracles in this body, perhaps it will not be until we gain our resurrected bodies, but this we know: "There will be no more dying or pain, for he will wipe every tear from our eye."



PRACTICE

Practice hope. Yesterday we wrote what we lament, today we will be bold enough to write what we hope. Often, it's so big we don't dare mention it. We hope for healing, but we don't believe it is possible. We hope for an end to our mental health struggles, but we do not believe it possible. Today, we dare enough to hope for it. As if a child writing a Christmas list, Write down the healing you want, even if you think the words on the page are totally unbelievable, write them in the same spirit we proclaim the resurrection of Jesus: as the most unbelievable true thing we have ever heard.

PRAY

Inhale: Holy Spirit...

Exhale: ...give me hope.

From Romans 5:5 - And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out...

DAY 14: SILENT NIGHT

MEDITATE

I have always loved Silent Night as a melody, but I particularly love the way it dwells on the moment of a newborn. It was probably this song that introduces most children to the word “virgin” and in doing so sets the stage for a song that is intimately about the strange wonder of the incarnation. A baby is actually here. A fragile one, with a mother. Those who have children know that after the scream and pain of childbirth does come a strange silence. A mother and child, if only for a moment, rest together. And in this song, we have a glimpse of the beginning of the moment that changes everything.

Jesus is born. And yes, there will be crying and nursing and growing up and all that. But here for a moment, the world is still like a father who upon seeing his child has lost all words. The world wonders. Shepherds quake. Lights begin to glow. And yet, here in the fragility of a birth moment comes the mighty strength of Christian philosophy: because God became man, all of evil will be defeated. Do you see how strange this song is? It’s soft and sweet, and yet it announces the battle cry of God’s entrance into the world to conquer sin and suffering once and for all: “Christ the savior is born.” How Christianity turns the world on its head: a baby is born into a silent night, and the world will never be the same.

I encourage you to listen to this song with all the stillness and wonder of knowing that Jesus came in the body for us.

**SILENT NIGHT! HOLY NIGHT!
ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT
ROUND YON VIRGIN MOTHER AND CHILD!
HOLY INFANT, SO TENDER AND MILD,
SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE,
SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE.**

**SILENT NIGHT! HOLY NIGHT!
SHEPHERDS QUAKE AT THE SIGHT.
GLORIES STREAM FROM HEAVEN AFAR,
HEAV’NLY HOSTS SING, “ALLELUIA!
CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN!
CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN!”**

**SILENT NIGHT! HOLY NIGHT!
SON OF GOD, LOVE’S PURE LIGHT
RADIANT BEAMS FROM THY HOLY FACE
WITH THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE,
JESUS, LORD, AT THY BIRTH!
JESUS, LORD, AT THY BIRTH!**

**SILENT NIGHT! HOLY NIGHT!
WONDROUS STAR, LEND THY LIGHT;
WITH THE ANGELS LET US SING
“ALLELUIA” TO OUR KING:
“CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN!
CHRIST THE SAVIOR IS BORN.”**

DAY 15: YOU LONG FOR UNION

SCRIPTURE

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" – Genesis 1:27-2

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." – Revelation 21:2

MEDITATE

One of the strangest realities of the embodied life of Jesus is that he (and the rest of the Bible) constantly relates his life to sex and marriage. This can be jarring. But once again the Bible looks at our physical life (of sex) and declares it both good and full of meaning. So we must take the Bible as it is, and admit that God seems to want to use sex to teach us about the fullness of life with him.

The metaphor is all over scripture. The Old Testament sets this theme with the prophets comparing God to Israel's lover. Jesus continues by comparing his life to a bridegroom at a wedding. (Mark 2:18-20, Matthew 9:15, Luke 5:34-35) Paul takes up this theme and says that the church is the bride of Christ, and Jesus is our long-awaited husband. The wedding supper of the lamb at the end of time is the wedding and consummation of all that we long for, for the bride and groom are fully together in the way they were meant to be. The drumbeat of scripture is a longing for divine union.

Our bodies teach our souls the same. We need not get specific to say the obvious: we long for physical union. All of us in our own particular embodied life seem to be made to desire the body of someone else. In fact, this is one of the dominant facts of life: We seem to be made incomplete.

God affirms this uncomfortable reality, actually, when he looks at the body of Adam and says it is "not good" that he is alone. Recall this passage comes before Genesis 3 and the fall. Even in paradise, Adam is incomplete without Eve and it is her arrival that makes him a poet, for he sings about finding the part of him that was missing.

So it is that when we examine our own bodies we find we are made with a common longing to be unified with someone else. And when we examine the embodied life of Jesus, we find a refrain of an answer: *Because you were made for me, I am the bridegroom you've been waiting for.*

Here we find what even Paul has to admit is "mysterious," our physical desire for sex shows our soul's longing for union. Single or married or celibate or pregnant, it is something to marvel at: God's image is all over us. Most importantly, the longing we feel for union is not a longing that will go unanswered. For in the body of Jesus, our bridegroom has come.

PRACTICE

The Bible tells us that union with God is really the goal of salvation. That we become one with Him and this sheer delight of being invited into the relationship of the Trinity is what we long for. Take today to soak in that. As much as you simply enjoy the presence of another, or the physical gift of a spouse, enjoy today that the body of Jesus is your invitation into union with God and the rest of the world. There is a reason you have the longings you do, and in God they find a home.

PRAY

Inhale: Thank you, God...

Exhale: ...You're close to me.

From Psalm 34:18 - The Lord is close to the brokenhearted...

DAY 16: YOU LONG FOR ECSTASY

SCRIPTURE

"I say to the Lord, ' You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.'...The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance...Therefore my heart is glad and tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." – Psalm 16:2, 6, 9-11

MEDITATE

Yesterday we examined how sex teaches us about our longing for union with God and others, but consider today how much pleasure is a part of that. God did not have to make sex this way. But apparently, he did. It seems he wants to make us blush with the enjoyment of the created order.

We will honor what Paul calls "the mystery" by staying high level with this one, but it's worth devoting some attention to, even if only with a sideways glance. God made the physical world good, and at the center of it, he places sex as a sign of our longing for union with God and others. As it turns out, that is a place of ecstatic pleasure.

God means to tell us that he intended our bodies not for pain, but for joy. And there is a lot to explore here as Christmas approaches.

We often find ourselves embarrassed over our search for ecstasy and joy. No doubt because we look in so many of the wrong places. Our bodies are so often the place of our idols. Whether it's sex or food or drugs or something else, we have sought pleasure in idols and it has caused us great pain.

But Christmas demands we see that our sin cannot fundamentally change what God made good. God intends us for a life of ecstasy and joy. This is good news!

Many spiritualities are, at their core, about detaching and avoiding pain or pleasure. Many deny the body because they are, frankly, either embarrassed or afraid of the search for enjoyment. But the incarnation will have none of that. The Son of Man came so that we might have life and life to the full. Our sexed bodies start this exploration—we seem to be made to find ecstasy in relationship—and the incarnation answers the exploration: "Yes, indeed! You are made for abundant joy."

PRACTICE

Take this season to explore the Christian hedonism laid out in the Bible. Of course, be careful that the enemy does not twist this into any idolatrous hedonism. But know too that we are called to be more in love with God than we are careful with idols. In becoming lavish lovers of God we find how joy, not restraint, is at the center of the world God gave us. So find it in the Christmas world God gave you. Throw a party. Make love to your spouse. Fix a big breakfast for the children. Build a fire for the family and just bask in the warmth. Everywhere we turn the body reminds us that God has made us to enjoy him and the world. Let us receive the gift!

PRAY

Inhale: Father, Son, and Spirit...

Exhale: ... in You I delight.

From Psalm 37:4 - Take delight in the Lord...

DAY 17: LOVE CREATES LIFE

SCRIPTURE

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” – John 3:16

“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler from the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” – Revelation 1:4-6

MEDITATE

There is at least one more thing sex has to teach us, and that is that love makes life.

To start with, consider the fact that most of the world that God made is biologically divided into sexes, and that it takes those sexes coming together in union to make new life. Though we can be quite embarrassed about the whole embodiment of sex, God programmed it everywhere as the very cause of life.

Perhaps he wants to insist on teaching us that love is a generative thing. Love, in other words, creates life.

We see this lesson in the creation narrative, that God loves and thus he creates. We see it in the incarnation, God loves the world thus he comes into it. We see it in the resurrection, God loves us thus he redeems us to new life. Everywhere we look in the Christian story, love gives way to new life.

Christmas is a wonderful time to see this at a theological level, for it is the time that the lives of families come together. And families are often the places of our frustration. They are often the places where we lack love. Where we struggle with forgiveness.

But the insistent message of Jesus is that love creates life. So we follow in his footsteps. How might we let love create life in our families this season? Could we create life simply by showing up to a holiday gathering we don't want to be at? Could love create life by speaking a kind word when we'd rather not? Could we love and create life by giving a thoughtful gift? By withholding a criticism? By being patient?

PRACTICE

If God has loved the world into existence, how can you participate in that love of everything and everyone he has made in this season. Make a list of three ways you want to love the people around you in the gatherings of the holidays. Ask God to help you do that.

PRAY

Inhale: Thank you, God...

Exhale: ... for Your love for me.

From John 3:16 - For God so loved the world....

DAY 18: SLEEP AS LIMITATION

SCRIPTURE

"In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves."
– Psalm 127:2

MEDITATE

One of the odd facts of our bodies is that we seem to be made with a built in handicap: we must sleep! This is a limitation in one real sense. We simply cannot achieve all that we hope to achieve in the day because our body literally begins to shut down on us. At very predictable intervals, we simply cannot go on.

In this sense, sleep shows how we are unlike God. For he does not tire nor sleep. (Psalm 121:3-4)

And yet Jesus, when he took on a body, slept. He slept as a demonstration of humility: he was tired. He slept as a demonstration of peace: sleeping in a boat when others were worried. He fought against sleep as a demonstration of courage: praying all night in the garden.

Let us make a clear distinction here. A created limitation is not a problem. It is very important to see that though we are unlike God in our need for sleep, that does not mean our need for sleep is a flaw or a weakness. Not at all. In fact, God seems to think it good that we must embrace what he chooses to embrace: Rest.

So what then, would it mean to revel in our God given limitations? To take up the task of sleep as an act of worship to the God who made us to rest?

PRACTICE

Through the rest of Advent, try doing a kneeling prayer before bed and after waking. Surrounding sleep with prayer is one way to lean into the spirituality of sleep. At night, try: "May I rest in the peace that You care for me." In the morning, try: "May I walk into this day as you walked into the world, full of love."

PRAY *Inhale: Lord of rest....*

Exhale: ...grant me peace.

From Psalm 127:2 - ...for He grants sleep to those He loves.

DAY 19: SLEEP AS GIFT

SCRIPTURE

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” – Genesis 2:2-3

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” – Exodus 20:8-11

MEDITATE

Yesterday we reflected on how sleep makes us human, and not God. But there is another half of our embodiment that reflects God: we, like him, REST!

Rest of this kind is not the mere cessation of work. It is the work of rest, rather. This means that we run *to* rest rather than run *from* work.

One of the core claims of Christianity is that God rested on the seventh day from his work, and the book of Hebrews tells us that God entered into sabbath rest then. We see this in a reflection of our spiritual lives, that Jesus on the cross said that “it is finished!” In other words, the work of creation and the work of redemption is finished in the work of the triune God for us. This means that we can rest in the peace of what God has secured in his work on the cross.

This means we can rest in the peace that “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.” We can rest in the peace of the Christmas announcement: that God in a baby’s body was born to redeem the world. This is why Christmas is good news, we rehearse the drama that God came for us, lived for us, died for us and rose for us.

Perhaps it is in our Christmas season the most we need the reminder of rest. We are busied by holidays. We are exhausted at year’s end from months of work. What better time, then, to sabbath. To spend a day in worship, in eating, in napping, and in nature. Whatever it is that gives your body and soul rest, figure out how to embrace that as the gift of being human: you were made to rest.

PRACTICE

Plan out your coming Sabbath this Sunday. Write down what would make an ideal day of rest for you. Even if this coming Sunday does not allow for it because of holiday complications, save your notes. Begin to work out an ideal Sabbath as a way to try and practice the gift of Sabbath in the new year.

PRAY

Inhale: King Jesus...

Exhale: ...You are Lord of my Sabbath.

From Mark 2:27-28 - Then He said to them, ‘Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath...’

DAY 20: SLEEP AS RESTORATION

SCRIPTURE

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways."

– Psalm 139:1-3

MEDITATE

One of the fascinating modern discoveries of sleep is how good it is for our emotional lives. The medical wisdom goes something like this: there's no part of your body and mind that does not suffer from lack of sleep and there is no part of it that does not benefit from good sleep. Sleep is an all-encompassing good, and honoring our need for it is one way we can honor God in our bodies. When we sleep we give him the simple glory of being the creatures we were made to be.

One way to do this is simply to lean into a good night's sleep tonight as a response to the gift of the God who gives sleep. Much like on Christmas, one of your great joys will be to see a child or family member simply enjoy the gift you picked out for them. So you can simply enjoy the gift of sleep as an act of gratitude to the God who made you for it.

Here's some facts to help you do it. One of the fascinating modern insights into sleep is that REM sleep is the only time during your life when your brain is completely devoid of the anxiety-triggering molecule known as noradrenaline (or norepinephrine). But at the same time, we have learned that during this phase of REM, dreaming keeps the key emotion and memory centers of the brain (the amygdala and hippocampus) activated. Taken together, these two things suggest a beautiful, physiological grace of God's design: In sleep, we can reprocess the memories and feelings of life free of the stress chemical. This is why therapists and psychologists agree that simply getting good sleep is one of the hands down best things you can do for your mental health.

Rest tonight, then, in the physiological grace that God gives you a nightly therapy called sleep, where your body and mind work out the difficulties of the day in his designed place. Rest knowing that when the Bible says he gives sleep to those he loves, it means it. God loves you, so he gives you this gift.

PRACTICE

Whether or not you sleep well tonight or did last night, lay down tonight as an act of gratitude. And whenever your mind comes to it, say a prayer of thanks that for whatever hours you have tonight. You get to rest in this bed for at least some time, basking in the gift of his sabbath rest.

PRAY

Inhale: Father God...

Exhale: ...You search and know me.

From Psalm 139:1-3 - You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise...

DAY 21: O HOLY NIGHT

MEDITATE

This hymn, which is rightly one of the world's favorites, is astounding in its theology. Most of the famous versions do not sing all the lyrics, so take note of the riches of theologies it contains.

The world, it notes, wants a savior, so much that it “lies in sin and error pining” for renewal. It notes that Jesus, in his embodiment, “knows our needs” and “to our weakness is no stranger.” I must note that this was originally written by the poet Placide Cappeau, who lost one hand in a childhood shooting accident. While the English is different from the original French, I always wonder whether the notes of suffering and “to our weakness being no stranger” comes from a life of physical difficulty. But the more majestic notes of the song pronounce the significance of the incarnation over the bodies of human relations. It is an abolitionist hymn, proclaiming that chains shall break and men shall be brothers.

I commend this hymn to you as a meditation on the hope the incarnation brings to the whole world.

**O HOLY NIGHT! THE STARS ARE BRIGHTLY SHINING;
IT IS THE NIGHT OF THE DEAR SAVIOR'S BIRTH.
LONG LAY THE WORLD IN SIN AND ERROR PINING,
TILL HE APPEARED AND THE SOUL FELT ITS WORTH.
A THRILL OF HOPE- THE WEARY WORLD REJOICES,
FOR YONDER BREAKS A NEW AND GLORIOUS MORN!
FALL ON YOUR KNEES! O HEAR THE ANGEL VOICES!
O NIGHT DIVINE, O NIGHT WHEN CHRIST WAS BORN!
O NIGHT, O HOLY NIGHT, O NIGHT DIVINE!**

**LED BY THE LIGHT OF FAITH SERENELY BEAMING,
WITH GLOWING HEARTS BY HIS CRADLE WE STAND.
SO LED BY LIGHT OF A STAR SWEETLY GLEAMING,
HERE CAME THE WISE MEN FROM ORIENT LAND.
THE KING OF KINGS LAY THUS IN LOWLY MANGER,
IN ALL OUR TRIALS BORN TO BE OUR FRIEND.
HE KNOWS OUR NEED— TO OUR WEAKNESS IS NO STRANGER.
BEHOLD YOUR KING, BEFORE HIM LOWLY BEND!
BEHOLD YOUR KING, BEFORE HIM LOWLY BEND!**

**TRULY HE TAUGHT US TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER;
HIS LAW IS LOVE AND HIS GOSPEL IS PEACE.
CHAINS SHALL HE BREAK, FOR THE SLAVE IS OUR BROTHER,
AND IN HIS NAME ALL OPPRESSION SHALL CEASE.
SWEET HYMNS OF JOY IN GRATEFUL CHORUS RAISE WE;
LET ALL WITHIN US PRAISE HIS HOLY NAME.
CHRIST IS THE LORD! O PRAISE HIS NAME FOREVER!
HIS POW'R AND GLORY EVERMORE PROCLAIM!
HIS POW'R AND GLORY EVERMORE PROCLAIM!**

DAY 22: THE SHAPE OF OUR APPETITES

SCRIPTURE

"The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." – Genesis 2:9

MEDITATE

One of the simplest reasons we know that human beings are not just spiritual beings is that God made us with stomachs. This means we are shaped not just with needs, but with desire. The Bible sets out this dual paradigm of eating as both need and desire in Genesis 2. Food was both "good for food" and "pleasing to the eye." (Genesis 2:9) God made us need nourishment, as a sacramental paradigm for our non-self-sufficiency, but also to want something more. This is absolutely not a bad thing. If you ever wonder why people can't stop taking pictures of their food, well, blame God. He made us not just to need the world of creation, but to love it. This is all well and good when our desires are well ordered.

Robert Farrar Capon writes that "we were given appetites, not to consume the world and forget it, but to taste its goodness and hunger to make it great." In other words, to eat and delight in God's creation and by doing so worship the God who graciously gave it to us. But in sin, we have inverted the gift of food. We worship the gift rather than the Giver. Consider the way we take the gifts of God and make them idols.

Instead of looking through food to God, we look at it as God.

We know this perhaps the most at the holidays. We eat our way around depression. We eat because we're tired. We eat because we're nervous at the holiday party. We eat because we cannot help ourselves. We eat not because we're full, but because we're empty.

Instead of wallowing in the guilt that our eating so often produces, we can look to Jesus and his incarnational wisdom as he showed us how to feast, how to fast, and how to simply enjoy ordinary fare in the meantime. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he makes a proclamation of where food must sit in relation to the bodies God gave us: Man does not live by bread alone. The key word is alone. This announces a priority. Jesus fasts as a physical reminder of the spiritual truth: food alone will not satisfy. If we are to enjoy food, we must first enjoy God.

Fasting, then, has been the enduring physical discipline of followers of Jesus. By abstaining from food, we indulge in God. And then, we are set right to go to food as a way of worship of God (not worship of food).

PRACTICE

Try a fast this Advent. Perhaps today, fast from lunch and simply take a 20 minute walk to pray. Or maybe tomorrow, spend a whole day without food, and examine the way that physical hunger is the best teacher for spiritual longing. Maybe do this in advance of a big meal with family and spend all day waiting for the feast. In advent we wait for God, what better way to practice than to spend a day waiting for food. (If it is too late in the holiday season to practically work in a fast, then plan one out for the New Year as a way to re-examine your spiritual relationship to eating.)

PRAY *Inhale: Teach my soul...*

Exhale: ... to hunger for You.

From Matthew 5:6 - Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

DAY 23: EMBRACING ORDINARY FARE

SCRIPTURE

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.” – Isaiah 55:1-2

MEDITATE

When it comes to daily eating, most of us exist on a seesaw. We bounce back and forth from indulgence to guilt. From pleasure to pain. And often many times in a single day. There is a physical corollary to our emotional struggle.

You may be aware of dopamine and its role in our brain, but you may not know how significantly it plays into our daily desires to eat. The most basic thing to know about dopamine is how your brain uses it as a ritual and reward trigger. When your brain likes something, it releases dopamine to signal that. But here's the far more important thing: your brain likes balance, so it then immediately tries to balance itself out by creating pain signals in the brain. This is known as the seesaw effect, and it's a big part of the reason why we so often feel guilt, pain, and discomfort after indulgence. By signaling pain or discomfort, the brain drives us to go get more of the good things in order to stop the pain. The problem is, this means that often we live in the shape of seesaw dopamine cycles, reveling in the pleasure of indulging and then writhing in the frustration of pain. And then repeat. This can even increase. The more sugar or drugs we consume, the higher the seesaw ride gets. Peaks of pleasure, then valleys of pain.

To me, it's spiritually fascinating to learn that the physical antidote to this dopamine seesaw is “spiritual eating” in the form of fasting or “everyday restraint.” The more we fast—or the more we simply practice everyday restraint by not feeding our brains high spikes of sugary dopamine indulgences—the more emotionally balanced we get.

In other words, the more steady we live, the more balanced joy we feel. And this explains almost everything you need to know about food and idolatry.

Idols are the things that so often feel good, but then betray us, they don't love us back. We ride their highs, but then they drop us low. But healthy eating leads to healthy spirituality and vice versa. We seek order and balance. Jesus and his followers, not to mention so many Biblical figures, are rather famous for their care around eating. Daniel is probably the most obvious, by training himself to live with fasting and ordinary restraint in Babylon, he became strong in the extraordinary moments. So the old adage goes: How you do one thing is how you do everything.

Consider then, the spirituality of ordinary eating. Consider how by having an everyday restraint, you might avoid shaping your life in the dopamine seesaw, and instead cultivate a strength of spirituality and physicality.

PRACTICE

This season is full of holiday parties. And that's a good thing, there is a reason to feast. In fact, tomorrow's devotion will be on the virtues of feasting! But in the meantime, consider the practice of ordinary restraint and balancing out your physical dopamine and your idol-seeking spirit with days of ordinary eating. This might mean that you make a commitment to ordinary days in between Christmas feasts. Perhaps you have a holiday party today, and you're making sugar cookies with the children on Christmas. Very well then! Enjoy both. But perhaps take the day in between to eat normal, and come back to balance. This helps us to resist the spiritual shape of dopamine seesaws, and instead take the redeemed shape of fasting, feasting, and ordinary fare in-between.

PRAY

Inhale: Lord, when I hunger...

Exhale: ... be my strength.

From Habakkuk 3:19 - The Sovereign Lord is my strength...

DAY 24: FEASTING!

SCRIPTURE

"Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.' So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead." – John 21:10-14

MEDITATION

As much as Jesus was known for fasting and simplicity, he was also known for his indulgences, and this perhaps is my favorite thing about the incarnation. Jesus feasted with friends. And if God did, then so should we.

This is so persistent in scripture that many find it scandalous. It is a continual source of embarrassment to certain segments of the church that Jesus' first miracle was producing a lot of wine. But we have to take Jesus as he is. The resurrection is an embarrassment to materialists everywhere—we all know that dead people don't get back up in the ordinary course—but here we are. The embodied life of Jesus upends our categories, and we have to hold on for the ride because he's God and we're not.

So, hold on for the feasting, because Jesus does it a lot. He eats with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes. Take the Bible at its word, no matter how uncomfortable it makes you: Jesus was accused of a lot, but one of them was this: "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:34)

We could fill pages with the implications, but frankly, it'd be more fitting to feast.

So know this piece of good news, my friend: God loves the world he made, and you should too. He made food to delight the eye and the stomach, so you should arrange it just right and put extra salt on it. Jesus taught that when the bridegroom was here, it was no time to fast. So Advent is a pretty good time to perfect your Christmas cocktail recipe and pass it around to friends and toast to the King who is coming. The Bible foreshadows a kingdom to come and let me tell you with such a glad heart, it is not some wispy place of clouds and harps (I genuinely don't know where we ever got such an idea) it is much more like a crowded kitchen. A wildly set table with God and the people of God sitting down to the supper of the lamb. In other words, it's a lot like your house at Christmas time.

So load up the tables. Pour the wine. Make LOTS of cookies, and let the children run wild with the joy of the incarnation. It's Christmas-time, and the God of food took a stomach so that he could eat with us. That's good news. Eat it up.

PRACTICE

Prepare to celebrate, for tomorrow we come to one of the best reasons to feast there ever has been: Jesus is born! Praise God, raise a toast, and set the table with your family. The body of Jesus is good news for all.

PRAY *Inhale: Lord of the harvest...*

Exhale: ... I come to Your table.

From Matthew 9:38 - Ask the Lord of the harvest...



FOREVER EMBODIED

Merry Christmas my friend! I hope this devotional has drawn you nearer to God, equipped you with scriptures and prayers, and helped you love God and honor him in your body.

Check back on my email list (www.justinwhitmelearley.com/subscribe) because I always offer a free Christmas day liturgy as well as a New Year's devotional for examining habits.

But for now, go in peace! God made your body, he has redeemed you by his body, and he is resurrecting us to new bodies! This is good news. Amen.