

The Gift of Christmas Present Sampler

KERI WYATT KENT



Introduction

There is a deep longing in our hearts, which the season of Advent intensifies. We long for presence, for meaning, for connection. With God, with others, with our own inner self.

The words of the prophet Isaiah resonate: the people walking in darkness have seen a great light. We are hoping to God it's true, that the darkness is giving way, that the light of hope really is on the horizon.

This time of year, in our culture, can be stressful. The thing is, right now, we don't need more stress. In fact, just preparing for the holidays may feel triggering. Our souls are hungry for hope. We crave peace. We want to give and receive love, more than any material thing. We're longing for joy. These four—hope, peace, love, and joy—are traditional themes of Advent, the season preceding Christmas.

When authors Jo Robinson and Jean Saehele asked women to describe the Christmas season in three words, the responses they received were telling. Off the top of their heads, women came up with combinations like:

- rushed, overwhelmed, joy
- gifts, tree, stressful
- travel, excited, worried

We're obviously a little conflicted, wondering how to usher in the holidays. And these responses are from a few years ago. Throw in the pressures of a world completely upended by a pandemic, and we may find ourselves with more stress and less joy. And yet, we long for a meaningful Advent season.

Insanity begins to happen when the gap between your expectations and your reality gets too wide. This month, that gap expands—especially for women, who despite the progress we've made culturally, still often consider Christmas our personal responsibility. Unless, that is, we decide to live intentionally. To be fully present.

Over the next four weeks, you're invited to reflect on the coming of Jesus, who brought these gifts and more into our weary world. To let go of expectations and trying to do too much, so that you can open your hands to the gift of Christmas present.

Psychologists tell us that “stress contagion” happens when one person's tension spreads to the people around them. Kids not only catch our stress, they add to it. Advertising brainwashes them into tiny dictator consumers.

We may think we're hiding it, (I'm fine, really. This twitch? It will go away in January.) But we are not fooling anyone. Our body language, voices, faces, show the stress, reveal the fact that the gap between our reality and our ideals gets very wide in December.

We say we want to be compassionate, but we get competitive. We say we want to focus on our priorities, but instead we become perfectionists. We say we want to look for true meaning, but we get up at 4 a.m. to get in line to drop \$120 on whatever toy or gadget the advertising industry has convinced us, or the aforementioned tiny dictators, is indispensable and must be obtained and placed under our Christmas tree.

More than any time of year, the holidays are a time when focusing on the moment feels impossible. We've got Pinterest pins and voice memos and hastily jotted notes on the margin of the WalMart Christmas flyer, reminding us of all the things we have to do and buy and *curate* in the next four weeks. We're shopping wrapping, planning decorating.

Yet no matter how much we do or buy or plan, we wrestle with some guilt, because we think we're supposed to focus the spiritual

meaning of what was once a religious holiday. The layered obligations and conflicting goals add up to stress.

The obvious question about the holiday season, the season of Advent, is why? Why, when we want to focus on deeper things, do we get distracted by the superficial?

During this special time of year, fueled by too many hours of Pinterest and HGTV, we get obsessed with decorating and crafts and cooking—even if we normally don't really enjoy those activities.

Why does Christmas become a competition? What is it that we are trying to “win”? What is it that we are really seeking? Maybe: significance.

Which is not a bad thing to want. You were created for significance—in fact, you're deeply loved, and you already have significance. How much time do you spend seeking what you already have? You already have it—even if you don't feel or recognize it yet. You don't need to seek significance in things that cannot give it: accomplishments, busyness, stuff.

Our desire for significance might be fueling our crazy plans for cookies, decorating, gifts, parties. We want that cozy holiday feeling, we want to know that we created that wonderful moment, that amazing memory, that magical Christmas morning--and we make ourselves and everyone around us crazy trying to achieve it. But, instead of cozy, we feel pressure. Instead of joy, we feel stress.

A lot of this is about our need to be okay, or even, amazing. The truth is, we want to win. We want to win Christmas. After last year, when many of us had to forgo gathering, there's a pressure to make this year better than ever.

How can we regain our sanity? Well, I can't promise you complete calm during the holiday season, but I do want to give you a gift: the gift of Christmas present. This devotional can help you to pause, for just five minutes a day, to slow down, to dial in to what you most want: a meaningful Christmas season. And that five minutes can help recalibrate and reconnect you to the four themes of Advent: hope, peace, love, and joy. It will give you some quiet thoughts to hang on to during your day, to help you to slow down and be fully present.

Our stressful state comes directly from our hurried state. We're

hurried, busy, overwhelmed. This amps up during the holidays. But our stress is less about our circumstances, and more about how we *think about* our circumstances.

And we don't interpret accurately when we're hurried. And we're hurried when we are thinking about the past or the future, instead of the present moment. One way to reduce your stress is to simply notice, what am I thinking about? Am I thinking about the past, even ten minutes ago, or the future, what's going to happen, what you have to do? Or are you fully present right now, paying attention to yourself and to others? Am I distracted or attentive?

When we are haunted by Christmas Past, or Christmas Future, we cannot receive Christmas Present.

Some of us are stuck in Christmas past. We re-live past burned turkeys or gift flops and worry we won't get it right. Or we remember past disappointments or criticisms. Our holiday memories are painful, but we can't let go of them. Our fragile heart says, "I remember this season. It's the one where I always get hurt, where I have felt deeply disappointed."

We focus on the past and try to revise it—which is impossible. We vow that this year will be different. We're trying so hard and yet it never seems to be enough.

Maybe you're just trying to survive a time that seems to simply highlight your loneliness. Maybe this is your first Christmas without a certain person, or yet another Christmas where you are again aware of feeling lonely or left out. You're aware of what you once had, but don't any longer: a parent, a spouse, a houseful of children.

The prevailing emotion of Christmas past is regret. Regret is the fear that we have messed up. Regret keeps us from experiencing the joy and peace of Christmas present.

Others of us are living in Christmas future, ruled by our to-do lists. We're shopping, wrapping, baking, decorating. We could try to enjoy those things, but instead, we endure them, because they're a means to an end, a way to have something we believe is in our immediate future: the approval and admiration of other people, whether it's for gifts, the perfect meal, our kids being happy on Christmas morning.

Christmas feels like a race, and if we stop running, it won't happen.

I remember one year, after a particularly stressful day of baking, shopping, wrapping, and planning, I told my husband, “I am making Christmas happen!”

Living in Christmas future creates a huge burden, made heavier by our resentment. We focus on tasks rather than people but get mad when people don’t appreciate our efforts. We set ourselves up for failure, exhaustion, or both. We can’t enjoy the present moment because we have too much to do and no one to help us. Why isn’t anyone helping us? Maybe it’s because we’ve made it clear that they can’t do it right so they might as well not try. Or maybe, we simply haven’t asked for help, and other people assume we’re having fun doing everything.

It is hard, all year long, to be present. That is, to focus on the moment you are in right now, instead of regretting about the past: mistakes you’ve made, things that didn’t get done; or worrying about the future: things that you have to do, upcoming tasks or gatherings.

Focusing on the future or the past will make you feel hurried. Focusing on the present will help you to slow down, calm down, feel more content. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who was obviously thinking about something else? That something else is often the past, or the future. That keeps them from being fully present with you. Maybe you’ve been that person, who is not fully present.

Contrast that with someone who is fully present, totally attentive, actually listening.

This time of year, it’s hard to be present. Which is ironic, because it’s a time we talk about presents a lot. But the one thing we forget to give ourselves, and the people around us, is the gift of being present, of being mindful, paying attention, being in the moment.

Think about recent history: pandemics, politics, etc. You can make all kinds of plans, but really, very little is within our control. Or as the Bible says, We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps. (See Proverbs 16:9)

This book will keep you centered during this busy time of year. This year, we need that centering more than ever. We need the gift of Christmas present. This book is an invitation to savor the season—

without feeling like it's another thing on your to-do list. What if you gave yourself just five minutes a day to slow down, reflect and pray?

This year, let's walk together through the Advent season. Advent means coming—we're anticipating the coming of Jesus, the birth of the Messiah. If it's helpful, you can light the candles in an Advent wreath, but don't feel you have to. Traditionally, the four weeks of Advent focus on four themes: hope, peace, love and joy. These will provide a framework for our journey together.

Each day, you'll read a verse. Don't skip the Scripture (you know we all do it)! Stop, read slow, reflect. Be fully present, listening to God speak through the words on the page. If that's all you have time for, that's enough. But if you want to give yourself a gift, keep going.

Read the short reflection that follows each Scripture. Each day offers a journaling question, and a prayer. These are tools, use them or don't, but take some time each day to pray and reflect. That simple practice: read, reflect, journal, pray, can slow you down a little. And slowing down helps us to be present, to live in the moment instead of the future or the past.

What would happen if you were to slow down enough to be present during the next four weeks? Being present is a gift you can give to yourself, and to others. Our tendency to cling to the regrets of the past, or worry about the future, is driven by fear. Too often, we listen the voice of fear, and it drowns out the voice of love that would keep us in the present. When we live in Christmas present, we let go of regret about the past, and worry about the future, and we experience peace.

Is the emotion underlying your holiday stress actually fear? We think we just need to power up, to be brave, courageous. But the Bible says the opposite of fear is love. Love helps us be brave. Slowing down helps us to breathe and live courageously. And this resource can help you listen to the voice of love, for just a few minutes each day.

The following are excerpts from The Gift of Christmas Present. Find the entire book with devotions for each day of Advent on amazon.com

Week One

HOPE



Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Ephesians 5:20)

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

A few days ago, we celebrated Thanksgiving. What did you give thanks for?

When we stop and take stock of things, breathe for a moment and remember that all is gift, doesn't it ignite just a little bit of hope in our hearts?

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays, because I love to gather friends and family and feed them. Hospitality is my jam. A day focused on gratitude, good food and people around my table? What's not to love?

How does gratitude intersect with hope? Gratitude is the path to hope, and faith. We can't just force faith, muster up hope. But we can choose gratitude. If we make gratitude our daily practice, we will find our outlook on life to be more hopeful. We will notice more specifically what God has done, what blessings flow in our lives.

. . .

Journal: Stop, breathe, and take stock. What are you thankful for?

Pray: God you are good. In spite of the hard things in my life, I am grateful for your presence in my life. Give me strength for the challenges, and open my eyes to the blessings.

Week Two

PEACE



*But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.*
(Psalm 131:2)

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

When my son was small, he loved to snuggle. His head on my shoulder, his little fingers absently stroking my arm. No matter what else I needed to get done, I would remind myself to stay present in those moments, knowing they'd be fleeting.

The image of a weaned child is provocative. A nursing baby feels demanding, needy. They root about, trying to take, to get fed. A weaned child though, is content with simple presence, with just snuggling. It's a metaphor for peace.

This week, think about just sitting quietly, cuddling with God. Allow your soul a few moments of stillness, quiet.

Often we say we want peace, but we go after it like a hungry, squalling infant, rooting about trying to satiate our needs. But desperately seeking peace is counter-productive. Instead, imagine ourselves

simply sitting in intimate connection with God. When we let go of our demands and seek only presence, peace flows in.

Of course you have a lot to do, and making time for simply being still is hard. But give yourself the gift of a few moments of presence.

Journal: What situation are you facing right now where you need God's comforting presence, like a mother with a young child? What emotions does this image of a weaned child stir up in your heart? In your memory?

Pray: God, today I just want to spend a few minutes being quiet and still in your presence. Show me how to set aside distractions and worries and simply enjoy the gift of time with you.

Week Three

LOVE



*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.*

(John 1:14, MSG)

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

In Advent, we remember the birth of Jesus; we put ourselves in the story to anticipate his coming, as if it were brand new. God no longer a far-off deity, but a flesh and blood child who will grow into a man, who lives in our neighborhood.

There's this lovely paradox in John's description of Jesus as "glorious," because we know his human birth was so humble. He was born to parents who were poor, ordinary. But have you ever met someone who despite their humble circumstances, shines with a light of God's generosity and truth?

What if you could be that person? Jesus came to bring salvation, and to show us how to live. What would it take to live “generous inside and out, true from start to finish”? In other words, to be the same person all the time. To consistently live the values Jesus came to teach us.

Journal: At this time of year, we can confuse overspending with generosity. But what does generosity on the inside, generosity of spirit, look like? How can you be generous today?

Pray: God, thank you for loving me enough to come to earth, to become flesh and blood. You are not distant, but someone who understands the struggle and joy of what it means to be human. Help me to live like you lived: generous and true.

Week Four

JOY



In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

(Luke 1:26-30, 38, NIV)

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

In order for Jesus to be born, God needed to find a woman. Not just any woman. A woman who would be willing to take a huge risk, a huge step of faith.

It's easy to miss, but key: Mary was highly favored before she said yes. She hasn't even heard why the angel is there, but right off the bat, he tells her: God is crazy about you.

God was present with her, and favored her, before she agreed to this

highly inconvenient divine assignment. It just might be possible that God feels the same about you: that you're loved, favored—not because of what you do, but because of whose you are.

Mary's elderly cousin Elizabeth was pregnant. According to bible history, God had not spoken to his people through a prophet, an angel, or anyone, for about 400 years. The Old Testament ends, and there is 400 years of silence. Then an angel shows up, and both a virgin and a menopausal woman are pregnant. Things are apparently about to get very interesting.

In order to be present, to find joy, we must choose to listen to the voice of love, and respond to it. The voice of love is the counterpoint to all the messages of fear and shame: I'm inadequate. I'm alone. I'm scared.

The voice of love, on the other hand, says:

You are highly favored.

The Lord is with you.

Do not be afraid.

Journal: Sit for a moment, and focus on these words; do not be afraid. What are you feeling fearful about right now, in this moment, on this day the week before Christmas. What situation does this bring to mind? Where does it resonate in your life? What are you afraid of?

Pray: God, I am your servant. Thank you for your favor and your presence.