

I WITNESS

LIVING INSIDE THE STORIES *of* ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

KATE MOOREHEAD



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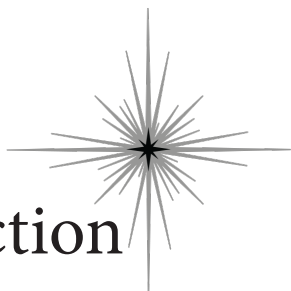
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Introduction

When I was a little girl, I got lost inside stories. My mom was a composer and a concert pianist, and she stayed at home with me and my brother. She gave us the gift of unstructured time, and my imagination filled in the empty spaces. I lay under the piano as she played, imagining I was shipwrecked on an island. I spent entire weeks making forts for my dolls with elaborate plots of rescue and intrigue. My world was huge within the confines of our house on Willow Street in New Haven, Connecticut.

As I grew older, my mom started writing small operas to be performed in churches in place of the sermon. She called them chancel operas as they were sung in the chancel—the space around the altar. Since there was no budget, casting was sometimes a challenge, and I played Mary many times. I also played the angel Gabriel, the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus, and other roles suitable for a young woman. Within these operas, I lived the stories again.

When Jesus tells us that we must be like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, he must have been referring, at least in part, to the imagination of a child. A child doesn't just read a story: A child enters a story, lives within it, and explores every nook and crevice. Imagination is a sign not only of creativity but also of a child's sense of safety. When I worked in orphanages in Russia, I quickly noticed that the children did not play imaginary games. They hardly played at all. It was as if they were tiny adults, too afraid of what might happen in the real world to risk imagining another. When I traveled to Maine to see how two girls from the orphanage were adjusting to their new adoptive home, the first thing I noticed was that they had begun to play and dream. This was a great sign, for it meant that they were beginning to feel safe.

If we are to draw closer to God, we must enter the story of salvation as a child, with our hearts and minds wide open. We must be willing to enter the story and live within it, imagining ourselves within the skin of the people of God. We must be there with Jesus on the night he was born.

Most of us have heard the story of Jesus' birth many, many times. But have you lived inside it? In the sixteenth century, Saint Ignatius tried to teach us what children do naturally. He urged us to live within the great story and to experience it from the inside. This book is an attempt to do just that.

This Advent and Christmas, let us live within the story of the birth of our Savior.

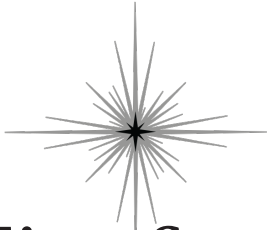
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Saint Mary the Virgin



Editor's Note: This book contains reflections for the full four weeks of Advent and the twelve days of Christmas. Of course, the Advent season lasts a different number of days each year, depending on the day of the week of Christmas. If you are reading this book during a year in which Christmas Day falls earlier in the fourth week of Advent, simply skip ahead to the devotion for Christmas Day (or double up and read extra meditations!)

As a tool to bring you into the stories, we use present tense. When we are with God, it really is the right now, this moment. It is I AM, not I was.



First Sunday of Advent

Waiting for God

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Luke 1:5-7

The name Zechariah in Hebrew means *The Lord has remembered*. Zechariah has prayed for a lifetime. He has prayed to have a son, and God has not answered his prayers. He must think God has forgotten him. He must think God has not remembered.

Imagine what it must feel like to worship every day in the temple, to hear the prayers of thousands of pilgrims—and to hear rejoicing from many of the pilgrims as their

prayers are answered. Meanwhile, no answer comes for you. Does Zechariah feel like a hypocrite? Does he begin to doubt the existence of God? Does he wonder if God is listening at all? Does he think that God has forgotten him?

Sons are more precious than gold in biblical times. To have a son is to carry on your bloodline. To remain barren is to experience a kind of social shame, a premature death, a deep and profound loneliness. Without sons, a man is lost. There is no future life beyond his death. He is alone.

Only one priest is chosen each year to go into the Holy of Holies. We don't know if Zechariah has ever been chosen before but we do know that he is selected as an old man to go inside this holiest place on earth for Jews. I wonder if he thinks that this is his one and only chance to ask God for a son. I wonder: Does a spark of hope ignite within his soul or has that spark long since gone out?

Do his knees hurt as he kneels in that holiest of places? Does he weep for sorrow at his lost hope? Does he look down on his wrinkled hands and believe that it is too late?

As Zechariah enters a new place, God finally responds. Zechariah's prayers are answered. The Lord has remembered.

When we pray, it is hard to wait for an answer. We expect results from God, like fast-food prayers, on our timeline, as ordered, but often those results don't come. Zechariah has waited a lifetime. He has asked God for a son time and again for his entire adult life, and the answer does not come until he is an old man, long past believing he would

ever become a father. But the answer does come. The answer finally comes.

Jesus later teaches that anyone who asks receives from God, and I believe his words are true. But the variable is time. When will our prayers be answered? If we are willing to wait like Zechariah, we will see the day when God responds, when God remembers.



Have you asked God for something? Are you still waiting for an answer? Advent is the season of waiting. Join Zechariah in waiting for God to come.