

UN • EXPECTED

daily advent devotions & reflections

BY TRACEY J. KELLY



Intent

The intent of this 21-day Advent devotional is to reorient us to what is holy, simple, humble, and unexpected during a holiday season that feels opposite. May the Word and these reflective thoughts, poems, and prompts bring us back to a place of longing for and belonging in Christ alone.

Introduction

You're invited into a safe space here. Find a few minutes out of your day to get alone with God, sit in some quiet, and create your own little oasis. Play your favorite calming music, if you feel so inclined. Open your Bible, get out your pen and highlighter, and feel no pressure to produce or perform here. You'll read Scripture, stories, poems, and reflective prose and you'll find prompts for journaling or jotting down some notes if that's helpful to you. My prayer is that this would be a tool for you to experience Christ in a new way and that you would be powerfully surprised by all the unexpected ways Jesus shows up for us. There is no wrong way to do this. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. You are loved, you are seen, you are known. Invite the Holy Spirit into this space with you and listen for what he may have to say to you this Advent season.

For starters

Read, reflect, and meditate on **Isaiah 53 + 61** and **Luke 1 + 2** as Advent begins.

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Sunday, December 4

Day 1



Read

John 1:1-18

I think what I've always loved about Jesus is how he's so *upside-down*. Christmas is no different and it might be the most upside-down Jesus has ever been. I can't help but see all the details. It's the *how* that gets me the most. *How* Jesus came to earth to save us. It wasn't in a flashy, big, or seemingly all-powerful way. It wasn't on an earthly throne or through political power. It wasn't through fame or status. It was through young, barely-married, but incredibly humble and faithful people. It was in a barn, in the mud, and in the dark. It was announced to shepherds – the lowliest of people. Jesus doesn't reach down to us in our low places, *he's standing next to us in them* because that's where he goes. To the low, dark, gritty places. He's there and he's already been there. It's in the stable, you find the King. It's in a baby, you find God himself. It's in the humble, you find true glory. It's in the unnoticeable, you find a Savior. It's in the darkness that you find the light. It's in the dirt that you find Jesus and his love for us, so unconditional. Be encouraged today that if you find yourself in a broken place – that's exactly where Jesus is.

Reflect

Take some time to be still and quiet. Create some space as you begin Advent to reflect on the things about Christ that seem unexpected to you. Jot down some ways that Jesus has surprised you.

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Monday, December 5

Day 2



Read

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

I've never needed the humanness of Jesus more than when I'm facing and feeling my own humanness and brokenness. Christmas reminds me of his fullness – being both God and man. I think about what he felt, experienced, and endured. I remember that he came as a baby, the most vulnerable and human way he could have come. And I wouldn't have chosen it. I wouldn't *choose humanness* and brokenness if I had the choice. *But God chose it.* And because God chose earth for his Son, I have the second chance of choosing heaven with him. Because of his humanness, I don't have to die in mine. It's by his wounds that I'm healed. *And it's not a fair trade.* We get to worship a God who doesn't play fair.

Reflect

What are the things in your life that have felt particularly human and hard for you? What does it mean to you to know Christ was born into brokenness like us?

[illegible]

Tuesday, December 6

Day 3



Read

1 Kings 19:9-13

In 1 Kings 19, we find Elijah hiding in a cave and God calls him out and he speaks to him. First, there's a strong wind that howls through the mountains, breaking it into pieces of rock. Then, there's an earthquake and then there's fire. Finally, after all of these big and terrifying events, there was the sound of a low *whisper*. What catches my attention is the way the Bible records God's role and presence in this story. After each element of wind, earthquake, and fire, it's written, "But the Lord was not in the wind... But the Lord was not in the earthquake... But the Lord was not in the fire." It's not that God is *unable* to use big, loud, and attention-grabbing things to reveal himself or speak to us. It's that in this situation, *he chose not to*. It was intentional. He chose to whisper. He chose the thing that could have been the most easily missed. It required Elijah to stop in his tracks, to be still, and to listen. I think Christmas time is filled with all kinds of strong winds, earthquakes, and fires. Everything seems so big and so loud. There is so much going on, we get busy, we host dinners, we buy presents, we make plans, we go to church, we take time off. These things aren't bad things, but I think we so often miss it. We miss the whisper of Jesus. It is so important to intentionally pause, to stop, to have a moment, to take a breath, to focus in, to read his Word, and to sit still in Jesus' presence. Although it's a whisper, it doesn't mean it's not important. In fact, the upside-down Kingdom of Heaven means that the whisper of God just might be life-changing.

Reflect

Are there times in your life where God communicated with you in an unexpected or unconventional way? What are some expectations you have about God and his voice that you think he may want to re-frame for you?

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Wednesday, December 7

Day 4



Read

John 10:1-18

One night, my husband and I were spending the evening with his brother and family. While we were eating dinner, our twin nephews were in their cribs upstairs sleeping, until one of them started crying. We could hear it pretty clearly from the table. I had no clue which one it was. To me, any cry from a baby sounds exactly the same. I absolutely love them and love being their aunt, but I have no idea what it's like to be one of their parents, to carry them, bring them into the world, live with them, take care of them, be with them every single day, and to get to know everything about them. So, I asked the twins' parents which one it was that was crying. Honestly, in my ignorance, I asked them if they could tell or not. And without any hesitation, they said, "That's Ren." Then it hit me. Of course they knew exactly who it was. It's their child, it's their children. Just like us and the Father. Just like the Father and Jesus. Just like Mary and her newborn baby. When it feels like God has forgotten our cries, our voices, our hearts, and our souls. When it feels like we're not so unique, special, seen, or even, loved. When it feels like our voices have been drowned out and we feel buried in our sorrow. Remember the Father. Remember who you belong to – whose you are. We know that's what Jesus had to do on the cross, when he cried out to his Father. Out of all the voices, God still knows mine. With no hesitation, he sees me. The one who created my DNA and destiny also knows my cry. I am a child of God and so are you.

Reflect

Take time to reflect on some times in your life where you felt forgotten, left out, or unknown. Ask God to meet you where you are today with those kinds of feelings. Ask him to reveal himself to you in a new and personal way.

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Read

John 13:1-16, 14:1-6 / Mark 3:14

One summer, my brother and his family were in town. We were outside with my niece and nephew, playing on a slip-n'-slide. My four-year-old nephew, Micah, was really afraid to slide down head-first. He tried scooting down on his bottom but it wasn't working and he was getting frustrated. Finally, he asked Kevin (his dad and my brother) if he could show him how to do it. Kevin ran inside, found some gym shorts because he didn't pack a bathing suit, and he came out and ran toward the slide. He slid down head first to the bottom. He got up and had the biggest smile on his face. He was soaking wet, *had* to be uncomfortable, and was so glad about it. He didn't tell Micah that he couldn't do it because he didn't have a bathing suit or that he didn't want to get wet or look silly. Without thinking twice, Kevin just *jumped in*. Not a care in the world – all for his little boy. Micah slid down that hill head first and exclaimed when he got to the bottom: "I did it! I was brave because I saw daddy do it first!" How much more does the Lord delight in being in the middle of our mess with us? That's exactly what God did when he sent his Son. He not only goes before us, but he also isn't far away from us. He is God *with us*. He isn't a distant God. He isn't standing on the sidelines just telling us what to do and how it works and wishes us luck. *He jumps in*. Head first with reckless abandon, even if it's horribly uncomfortable. He stands with us and smiles real big when he watches us jump in right after him. And we get brave when we see Jesus standing before us and by our side, choosing to experience everything, not only *for* us but *with us*: *Immanuel*.

Reflect

Are there places in your heart or life experiences you've had that feel too big, dark, or hard for God to jump into with you? Talk to God about those things today. Offer them to him and see what he may be speaking to you if you invite him into those places.

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Friday, December 9

Day 6



Read

2 Corinthians 4

We've all experienced interruptions in our lives of some kind. Some big, some small. Some life-altering, some minor inconveniencing. We've been pushed into what I like to call *un-comfort* zones over and over again by so many different things life can throw at us. Christmas and the entire season is not immune to this problem. In fact, this particular month can be especially dark and hard for those who have experienced loss or for those who feel deep loneliness or disappointment for where they thought they'd be in life by now. I, for one, often struggle with thinking that everything has to feel *Christmasy* in order for it to be a successful season. For me, that means time with family should look a certain way or for gifts to go well or for particular plans to be made and enjoyed. I like to put lots of pressure on myself and everyone and everything – it's so fun! The point is, I've found that the times in my life where I've experienced the most discomfort or interruptions to what I expected, are the times that I've experienced Christ and his presence the most or, at least, in an entirely new way. Maybe the plans fall through and maybe the time with family doesn't go so well. That's hard and that's okay. These glaring abnormalities can actually be a beautiful interruption. It's not to say that we don't acknowledge some real pain we may be experiencing, but rather, that maybe we take time to slow down. Maybe we even stop. We stop long enough to listen, to remember, to let all else melt away – except for the baby in the manger, who loves me so much that he came for me. *What a beautiful interruption.*

Reflect

Reflect on some times in your life, maybe even now, that feel like interruptions, inconveniences, or *un-comfort* zones. Ask God what he might be trying to reveal to you, even now.

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Read

John 1:14 / Luke 2:1-20 / Revelation 3:20

A few years ago, a colleague of mine was diagnosed with stage-four colon cancer. Only in her 30's, married, and a mom of a little girl, she had her world turned upside-down. A meal train was organized for her by some of her friends and an invitation was sent to a few of us who worked with her. I decided to sign up. I planned to go one Saturday evening to bring her some soup. She had also invited me to come inside and visit with her and her family for a bit. So, I picked up soup, I drove to her house, I stood on her doorstep and I knocked. I went in, met her husband and her little girl, and sat on her couch. I handed her some food and we chatted for a bit. The whole experience felt surreal to me. It felt personal and intentional, which I loved a whole lot. I hoped the whole time that she saw Jesus in me, and I prayed asking the Spirit to make himself known to her. Later, I was telling my dad about it. When I explained to him how it felt so surreal going to her house, he said, "It's just like Jesus incarnate, isn't it?" I only lived in relation to this person in one context: work. And now, there I was, at her door, in her home, meeting her family, and sitting on her couch. Just like what Jesus did for us. God had created his own context for revealing himself historically, but then he changed the script. He shows up at the front door, he walks in at our invitation, and he delights to sit with us. *The Word became Flesh*. And we, in turn, are totally transformed by his personal and intentional presence, as he stands on our doorstep and knocks.

Reflect

Thank God today for the ways he shows up for you. When you name or write down some of the ways Jesus has made his presence known to you, meditate on these promises of God that he will do it again.

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Read
Psalm 46

Christmas reminds us of both the beautiful and the broken. There is so much joy and comfort in this season and, yet, I'm often thinking about what feels really hard at the same time. The light makes you feel warm, but it also shows you how dark the darkness can really be. It's easy to notice what is lacking when things feel like they're *supposed* to be all bright and beautiful. I think that's what makes Advent so meaningful. The darkness is exactly why Jesus came. He steps into the hard, painful, and broken places. Where I feel sad, he brings comfort. Where I feel like a failure, he brings his light and truth. When I feel all that is missing or lacking, he is enough and he is with me. I'll say it again so I don't forget— *he is enough and he is with me*. Where things are broken and it doesn't seem like there's anyway around it, his love for me feels just like the healing touch my heart needs. I can finally stop trying so hard and I can see my shoulders finally relaxing and I know – he's here. And that's enough.

Reflect

What are some areas in your life or heart right now that feel dark or lacking? Take some time to invite Jesus into those places today.

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Monday, December 12

Day 9



Read

Galatians 3:13-15, 5

I've fought the darkness. I've battled to find God in it and I've searched for him in the depths of it. When I couldn't see anything in front of me, he showed up and showed me how bright his light could be. Darkness and evil are real and a force to be reckoned with. But Jesus is bigger. His light always cuts through. He always interrupts. He always shows up. He came to us when we couldn't find our way to him and he wore our flesh so that we could live freely from *ours*. Because of Jesus, when we feel the darkness the very deepest in our souls, we see his light the very brightest above them all.

Reflect

Be bold and ask God for deliverance and freedom from the bondage you are experiencing or that of someone you love. Reflect on the freedom Christ is offering to you.

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Tuesday, December 13

Day 10



Read

Luke 2:1-7

Christ's coming is a soft place to land for those of us who struggle feeling unraveled and unhinged – believing that we've failed if we stumble through our days feeling foggy, clumsy, and uninspired. Mary and Joseph learned quickly the beauty of messy things. I wonder if they'd tell us something so profound to encourage us or if they would just tell us, "It's okay." It's okay if things feel heavy and blurry. You are still loved even though things might feel a little off. God sees us starting to worry and get flustered and feel disappointed with ourselves and he's just been calmly saying, "It's okay" ever since. It's funny really... the more I let myself just *be*, the more joy I find there in that place. I think Mary and Joseph in that stable maybe felt the same kind of thing.

Reflect

Let yourself feel messy, imperfect, and unraveled today – whatever that might look like for you. Know that you are loved and not alone there. Ask God to help you see the good, the joy, and the wholeness available to you, even here.

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Read

Hebrews 12:1-15, 13:8

Do you think the evergreens
get jealous of the changing leaves?
Or do you think they beam their deep green
with pride for their constancy?

Do you think the bright, yellow leaves
know there is beauty to be found
in the transition, in the change,
in the season of in-between?

Or do you think they wonder why
they stand out, why they're different,
why they're always changing?

Do you think the evergreens question
their worth when they stand next to the
autumn trees?

Or do you think they see the good in the
work of their roots, and they value their
consistency?

I think, in the breeze, all the trees lean,
saying to one another,

*Be true to your roots.
Be true to your fruit.*

I think, in the breeze, the evergreens lean,
saying to the autumn trees,

*Seasons change and that's okay...
and just like us,
our Creator remains the same.*

Reflect

Think about some ways you compare yourself to others. Think about all of the "oughts" and the "shoulds" in your mind that run free usually. Believe today that you are right where you're supposed to be and that there is beauty in same-ness and there is beauty in change too.

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Read
Psalm 32

Kids know what to do when they don't know what to do – they run to someone or something safe. They hide behind mom or they bury their face in dad's arms. It's built in us as human beings to hide. It just starts to look different as we get older. And it's the same for us and our Heavenly Parent. God knows we're safe and, yet, wants nothing more than to be a hiding place for us. To tell us it's okay because he's with us, to show us the truth about what we're hiding from, and to eventually watch us face whatever it is with him right beside us, behind us, and all around us. God calls us out, asking us where we are. Are we willing to step out and be exposed before him? Because what waits on the other side just might be Heaven's best hiding place.

Reflect

Hide in your Heavenly Father today. Whatever that may look like for you. I pray that you would feel his safety.

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Read

Isaiah 61:1-3 / Luke 4:16-21

I think we often *miss the miracles*. It's like when my counselor encourages me on how much I've grown and how far I've come when I see her. I've told her how I tend to miss the miracle of that because it took so much *time*. It didn't *just happen* at the snap of my fingers. I compared it to when I accidentally burned my hand in the oven. Over four weeks, I watched as my hand healed more and more every day. At first it was really bad... like 2nd-degree burn kind of bad with a blister and everything, but my body knows how to heal a burn like that. My skin knew what to do, and after a few weeks went by, you could barely see anything on my hand. *That's amazing*. But we tend to miss how amazing things are when they take four weeks, four months, four years. The reason we give miracles their name is because they're *instantaneous*. That's what makes them so amazing to us. And God absolutely works that way. He's that powerful and that good. But he's also *that* powerful and *that* good that he would work through a *process* to reveal himself to us too. He makes a miracle out of our very lives – over time. We normally call it "growth" which is exactly what it is as well, but it's also a *full-blown miracle* that I am where I am today and I don't want to miss that. Maybe you know exactly what I mean. God is in the business of making us new, and maybe that's a miracle – and maybe that takes time.

Reflect

What are some not-so-instantaneous miracles in your life – past or present? Thank God for his persevering work in your life. Open your eyes to see his miracles that may not look like miracles to you right now.

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Saturday, December 17

Day 14



Read

Psalm 51 / John 13:1-20

A lot of life consists of the inability to be "real." Whether that's with ourselves or others, it is something that never comes naturally to anyone ever. What a scheme of the devil. He knows the power that comes with our being authentic. Bringing it all up and out and speaking the truth into the air. It's a terrifying risk. But if we don't take it, if we don't jump into this scary surrender, I'm convinced we won't ever taste freedom. Not necessarily freedom *from* something, but freedom *to*. Freedom to keep moving despite our brokenness. Freedom to keep loving and living and freedom to be loved and accept love and know we are worthy somehow because of Jesus. Jesus invites our brokenness into our relationship with him. Jesus has never been about anything other than our very souls and hearts. If the God of the universe created us, how can we believe for a second that he doesn't want the real us? He asks, invites, and welcomes our whole selves to him at all times no matter what. And so, I get to embody Jesus to other people when I invite their brokenness into my own life. When I ask for it, accept it, and welcome it in. When I walk beside and when I go down to the depths. When I bring my real self to the table and when I ask for the person across the table to bring their real self too – well I think maybe that's exactly what Jesus intended for me and for you.

Reflect

Choose a practical way to be "real" today with trusted people in your life. Be honest when a friend asks how you're doing or reach out to someone to share your burden with.

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Sunday, December 18

Day 15



Read
Psalm 27

Light –
For chasing and finding
For accepting and enjoying
For appreciating and pursuing
For pointing to and sharing
For beholding and cherishing
For hoping and living
For seeing and being seen
For exposing and protecting
For glory and not for shame

Reflect
Right down some ways you have engaged with "light" like this or ways you want to.

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Monday, December 19

Day 16



Read

Habakkuk 3:17-19

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.

Reflect

Name some times in your life (past or present) where you felt desperate for Jesus to meet you and like he was all you had. If you're in the middle of this type of season right now, I pray that you would experience the powerful love of Christ and that he would meet you right now in a new and real way.

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Read
Psalm 23

I'm learning that the things in my life that seem to be the hardest, are the scariest, and feel the most painful are that way for a specific reason – *they follow me*. I can't put these things down to pick them back up again at my own leisure. Everywhere I go, there they are too. When I go to work, when I come home, when I do anything, it's there. When I'm by myself or lost in a crowd. Whether I'm on a mountain top or in the valley. When I rest and when I'm busy. On good days and bad days. It's all-consuming, overwhelming, and apart of me. It follows me. So it all became obvious. This is why Jesus sent his Spirit to live inside of us. He knew that darkness always follows and that's what makes the darkness so dark. And He also knew if he sent his Light to follow quickly after us, it would make it that much more bright. The God of the universe, through his precious Son, has given us the power of his Spirit that raised Christ from the dead to live inside our very chests. And so, I can't put him down to pick him back up again at my own leisure. Everywhere I go, there he is too. When I go to work, when I come home, when I do anything, he's there. When I'm by myself or lost in a crowd. Whether I'm on a mountain top or in the valley. When I rest and when I'm busy. On good days and bad days. He's all-consuming, overwhelming, apart of me. *O Praise him, he follows me.*

Reflect

What are some battles you face that feel like they follow you? What does it mean to you to know that God follows you too?

[illegible]



Read
Psalm 84:10

I would rather be a doorkeeper,
if it means the house of my God.

I would trade having a room of my own
for a place to stand at the very door
that welcomes people home.

Because to live in the shadow of the enemy
is comfortably poisonous,
but to stand at the door of the way
to the Almighty
is uncomfortably glorious.

I want to wave you down, welcome you in,
and show you the way,
and as you walk through the door,
I'll know I succeeded,
when I'm quickly forgotten
in the light of God's glory.

Jesus-Pointers and Truth-Tellers,
that's what we get to be.
So I would rather be a doorkeeper
because I want a front row seat
to see God set people free.

Reflect

If you find yourself feeling insignificant today in your job, relationships, or life stage: hear that you matter, your presence matters, and the humble will be exalted.

[illegible]



Read
Genesis 3

We all have something in our lives that scares us the very most. Perhaps it's the fear of the inevitable, the fear of the unknown, the fear of loss and pain, the fear of rejection, the fear of abandonment, the fear of fear and anxiety itself, the fear of depression, the fear of addiction, the fear of a disease or a diagnosis, the fear of the future, the fear of the past, the fear of loneliness. The thing about fear is that we normally fear something not because we're afraid it will happen but because *it already has*. It already is happening. And when I think about the thing that scares me the most because it's happening even now, I remember that very thing stands in front of the King of Kings. That very thing is looked at square in the eyes by the Lord of Lords and it feels the very same fear it causes me. Which makes me feel less full of fear and more full of the life Christ is freely offering me.

Reflect

Sometimes our brokenness and depravity are overwhelming to us. Sometimes we aren't aware of it at all. Ask God to make your brokenness more aware to you and ask him to make his presence more aware to you too.

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Read

Isaiah 43 / Revelation 21:5

God doesn't *fix*.
He doesn't do patch jobs.
You aren't a mistake he needs to correct.
He isn't a janitor cleaning up your mess.
He doesn't use band-aids for your wounds.

God is in the business
of something much better.
Something much bigger.
Something much deeper.
Something much harder.
Something much more real.
Something much more rich.
Something much more creative.

God will *un*-do to *re*-do.
He unravels to remake.
Demolition to renovate.

God is in the business of making all things *new*.
Not making all things better.
Not making all things neat.
Not making all things perfect.
Not making all things easy.

He makes all things new.
Even you.

Reflect

Meditate on his Word today. Hear that he is for you and in the business of making you *new*.

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Read

Psalm 139

Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
Have you ever felt like he had left?
That maybe you were unworthy of his love
and undeserving of his presence?
Have you ever felt so terribly alone
and without any hope?

Have you ever cried out to him in total desperation,
with this darkness in your soul from the pit?
Realizing that you've spent your whole life doing
everything on your own, and now you're faced with
a truth that shakes you down to your bone.
Suddenly you find yourself whispering to the Lord,
these words that you've never meant before:

That I am not God, but he is True.
That there is only One who can bring me through.
That despite my brokenness and my sin,
he meets me right where I am,
and Christ made a way so that I could live.

Christ nailed my loneliness to the cross,
and then he picked up my hopelessness,
darkness, and shame, and he killed them with
every evil in his Mighty Name.

He has called me his by no merit of my own,
and his love, so unconditional,
is nothing I've ever known.

Yes, I am a sinner, but I am not second best.
And no, I'm not on the Throne,
but the one who is, lives in my chest.
So, I will lift up my head and I will take another step,
but not by *my* will - his instead.

Because when I felt the darkness the very deepest
in my soul, is when I saw the Light the very brightest
above them all.

Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
Have you ever felt like he had left?
Take heart, dear one, and fix your eyes,
but not on what is seen.
Fix your eyes, O fix them still,
on what you cannot see.
Believe, O heart, that he is near.
O believe that it is true.
That he never left you once, dear one,
and that he, O he,
is here.

Reflect

Journal your thoughts about where you find yourself today (mentally, emotionally, spiritually).
Take time to process your feelings and rest in the relentless presence and love of Christ.

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