Night Visions
searching the shadows of advent and christmas

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For the Tuesday Group,
whom I will always remember
gathered around the flame
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{illustrations}
In this strange season when we are suspended between realization and expectation, may we be found honest about the darkness, more perceptive of the light.

—Jack Boozer
The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before.

It is not possible to keep it from coming, because it will. That’s just how Advent works. What is possible is to not see it, to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. And you begin to grasp what it was you missed, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, watching God’s hindquarters fade in the distance.


For now, stay. Wait.

Something is on the horizon.
When I was a child, my family marked the coming of Christmas with candles. Each Sunday night of Advent we would gather by the Advent wreath in the darkened living room. I have few specific memories of what took place; I know that we read Scripture, sang a hymn, and prayed. I do remember that lighting the appropriate number of candles was a coveted responsibility shared by my sister, brother, and me. As a flame was added each week, our anticipation grew. We were drawing closer to the heart of the celebration.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Christmas falls in the dark of winter. Its roots lie in ancient festivals in which fires were kindled for light and warmth to ease the shadows and chill of the season. Growing up in the latter part of the twentieth century, with electric light so readily available, I rarely experienced utter darkness. Growing up in Florida, where Christmas is occasionally spent in air-conditioning, I had only a dim awareness of the relief that fire brings to shivering bodies. Yet in the childhood lighting of the Advent candles, something still spoke to me of mystery, of longing,
of something wondrous that lay on the horizon just beyond sight. I knew that the flames heralded celebration, were portents of the festival to come.

As we lit each candle of the Advent wreath, we pieced together the story of Christmas. By the time we lit the last candle, the white center candle, on Christmas Day, we knew the end of the story. Or so we thought.

As I have grown, I have gained an appreciation for how many ways there are to tell a story. Take the story of Christmas. We can tell it as the story of an unwed mother who dared to enter into partnership with God to bring forth new life; as a political story about the birth of a revolutionary; as a tale about a love that longed so much for us that it took flesh, formed in the dark womb of a woman who shared her body and blood to bring it forth. We can tell it as a story about darkness giving birth to light, about seemingly endless waiting, and about that which lies at the end of all our waiting. Any story can be told innumerable ways, not simply according to who does the telling but to where that person is on the journey. As my life unfolds and my perspective changes, I realize that each telling of a story reveals part of the whole, but does not contain the whole story in itself. The stories I tell are continually shaped by my changing understanding of events, conversations, feelings, influences, the people around me, and of my own self. The understanding of my
past continues to change according to the experiences of my present. With each telling, more of the story comes to light, even as the lighting of the Advent candles progressively leads us closer to the full blaze of Christmas.

As I have pieced together the stories and reflections contained in this book, I have come to understand them as being like candles lending light to the particular theme of each week, which was shaped by the lectionary readings for this season and by my understanding of the way this season unfolds. By itself, a daily reading would shed little light on a given theme. Taken together, the seven readings and accompanying prayers offer more illumination for the theme.

Not all the stories and reflections that I share actually occurred during the days of Advent and Christmas. They are, however, some of the stories that I carry with me in this season, that have fed my understanding of what these days mean. Darkness, desire, preparing a space, hope, birthing, welcoming, thresholds: I understand these themes not only from living through the seasons of Advent and Christmas but from living through the rest of the year as well, both in feast times and in fallow.

I carry with me the awareness that many people find that this season brings not tidings of comfort and joy but of frustration and grief. I have sought to acknowledge the shadows of this season as well as the light and to describe the ways that I find they dwell
together. I believe that Christ came not to dispel the darkness but to teach us to dwell with integrity, compassion, and love in the midst of ambiguity. The one who grew in the fertile darkness of Mary’s womb knew that darkness is not evil of itself. Rather, it can become the tending place in which our longings for healing, justice, and peace grow and come to birth.

Musician Suzanne Vega inspired the title of this book with her song “Night Vision” from her recording *Solitude Standing*. Sung as if to a child afraid of the dark, the song tells of the artist’s longing to give the child vision to see into the night. I believe that this is the gift that God holds out to us in this season: to carry the light, yes, but also to see in the dark and to find the shape of things in the shadows, as Suzanne reminds us. With a perception that goes beyond visual sight, we are called to know and to name the gifts of the night and to share the visions that emerge from the darkness.

I write these words on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, almost as far from Christmas as one can possibly get. Yet tomorrow the earth will begin its tilt away from the sun and the darkness will begin to wax for us in the Northern Hemisphere, drawing us closer to the mystery that lies waiting within it. In darkness and in light, God beckons us to keep vigil and to companion one another in this and every season. In giving voice to our visions, we find strength in the shadows and a presence that guides the way.
week six

Welcoming

{ New Year’s Day or Second Sunday after Christmas }

Look around; they all gather together, they come to you.

—Isaiah 60:4
have friends arriving in two days. I have looked forward to seeing Pam and Marsha, and though I am not the most skilled host, I will at least spread fresh sheets on their beds in the guest room and make certain they have towels in their bathroom and put bagels and juice in the refrigerator for breakfast. It is easy to welcome these friends who have shared my journey in significant ways and in whom I readily sense the sacred.

But sometimes I do not welcome others so eagerly. I resist those who try my patience, or who drain my energy, or who seem so different from me that I become uncomfortable. Sometimes I see myself in the story that Kathleen Norris tells in her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. An old Russian Orthodox monk, trained to welcome all guests as Christ, tells a younger one, “I have finally learned to accept people as they are. Whatever they are in the world, a prostitute, a prime minister, it is all the same to me. But sometimes I see a stranger coming up the road and I say, ‘Oh, Jesus Christ, is it you again?’”

Those who welcomed Jesus—the angels, the shepherds, the Magi—readily recognized him and knew the import of his arrival. They greeted him joyfully with their songs, their presence, their gifts. The rest of us sometimes have a more difficult time welcom-
ing Christ into our midst, particularly when he arrives in the guise of one who seems radically different from us or who gets under our skin or who angers us or who confronts us with parts of ourselves we don’t want to see.

There are, at times, good reasons not to welcome one who appears in our path. Occasions arise when it becomes necessary to turn away from a stranger, to leave the house of an abuser, to close the door on an opportunity or relationship or dream. In so doing, we may learn what it means to welcome our own selves, to receive in a new way the wholeness God longs for us to know.

The Feast of the Epiphany, which most Christians celebrate on January 6, will soon be upon us. The word *epiphany*, from the Greek *epiphanos*, means “manifestation,” “appearing,” or “showing.” As a holy day of celebration, Epiphany refers both to the appearing of Christ in the world and to the arrival of the wise ones who followed the star and welcomed the child.

As we prepare for Epiphany, God calls us to discern where the sacred shows forth, that we, too, may welcome it into our lives. The one who took flesh reminds us that to those with eyes and hearts to perceive it, the holy appears in our midst, in our lives, and in our own selves.
Wise women also came.
The fire burned
in their wombs
long before they saw
the flaming star
in the sky.
They walked in shadows,
trusting the path
would open
under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king.
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,
their own longing.

Wise women also came,
spreading no rumors,
sparking no fears
to lead
to innocents’ slaughter,
to their sister Rachel’s
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor’s washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came, at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came, and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.
In this and every season
may we see them,
the wise ones
who come bearing
your gifts to us.

They cloak themselves in garb
that rarely draws attention,
but they are there
at the edge of the shadows,
in the margins of our days,
on the threshold
of our awareness,
offering what we most need.

Give us eyes to see them now,
before they have left
to go home some other way,
before we glimpse
their departing shadows
edged in gold
and smell their spiced perfume
lingering behind them
in the air.
She is returning from the birthing as I write. When Kary checked in with Bill last night, he said it might be two weeks now before Joann delivers. But I woke this morning, in this house in the woods of west Florida where I am visiting, thinking today, perhaps today.

The call came at noon. Kary, having offered to stay with Joann and Bill’s daughter Alison during the labor, raced around the house in surprise. “What does one wear to a birthing?” I smiled, remembering my late-night mad dash to the hospital with Sally and Gordon when it came time to deliver my nephew Scott. Kary left. In jeans, maybe, or a cotton dress. I can’t remember; she was a blur. She called several times during the day, and finally just now to say she is leaving. Kathleen has arrived via Caesarean section.

I sit at this borrowed desk, chewing on my pen, listening to the dogs shift in their sleep downstairs. I am trying to write about Advent and incarnation as Joann and Bill hold Kathleen and each other, touch her hands, her feet, her face. All I can write is welcome, welcome, welcome.
Ancient One

who makes all things new,

may we receive with gentleness

and touch with hopefulness

and protect with fierceness

and love with tenderness;

and may we celebrate with gratefulness

and welcome with humbleness

and tend with gracefulness

all that you give

into our care.
The family intended it as a mother-in-law house, but the mother-in-law ended up living somewhere else, and so the house in the woods became known as the wedding house when her grandson made plans to marry. The entire assembly processed there after the wedding, following the path of luminarias that had been laid out through the trees. It was a skeleton of a house, still in progress; tiny lights snaked along its frame, lending a glow to the thin covering stretched across it. Here they had laid the feast, prepared the celebration. Walking in, I found myself stunned by the grace of its incompleteness.

It was Advent eve when I drove home from the celebration, and the Seven Sisters danced in the night sky over my left shoulder all the way home. That night I dreamed that my bones were strung with lights, that my skin glowed in welcome, that within my skeleton a feast had been laid. Here was the wedding house, unfinished but waiting to celebrate the meeting of souls. Here were the guests, waiting to dance under the night sky.
O my soul,
this is your work:
to light the candles
set the tables
prepare the room
lay the feast
pour the wine
welcome the guests
and bless
in your innermost being
and celebrate
with your deepest delight
the lovers and friends
families and kin
and all who dare
to cast their lot together;
O my soul,
bless.

{ week six: welcoming }
In the house of Lesley and Linda there is always a spare room or at least an extra corner of a futon to curl up in for a spell. Often there is an abundance of knees to lean up against, and if your heart happens to be hurting at the time you drop in, they’ll stop watching the game on TV long enough to give you a hug and feed you something.

Don’t go if you’re feeling complacent (or, perhaps, go as quickly as you can), because they tend to ask you questions that make you think, like what is the difference between boundaries and walls, and what would you call that dream if you had to give it a title? The best part is that they won’t treat you like company. They assume you know where the tea and the kettle and the mugs are and that you’ll make yourself a cup if you want one while you’re sitting quietly reading on their sun porch. The other best part is when Lesley drives me all the way to the airport to fly home when she knows it would be okay just to drop me off at the MARTA station.

Come to think of it, there are a lot of best parts about visiting the house of Lesley and Linda. You really should go sometime.
Openness of hand
tenderness of embrace
spaciousness of heart
graciousness of home
blessedness of earth
vastness of sky:
for all the spaces
that bid me welcome
I give you thanks.
Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances in bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.”

—Toni Morrison, Beloved

Orion watches as we search for words of invitation, his piercing arrow poised over the exposed flesh of our soft throats. We have both of us come to this place of meeting emptied, hollowed out like the night sky above us, yet wise to the stars that blaze in our shadows. Years of illness have made you transparent in more ways than one, but flesh covers your bones just the same. We touch, skin to skin, a thousand messages passing in our meeting.

The hunter’s arrow flies, but this time the piercing will leave not a gaping wound but a tender opening. This is the knowledge that I will carry within me in the days to come: that the ghosts in my bones, the ones that send their clomping echoes through my brain during sleepless nights, will cease their restless pacing; that the aching memories my body still carries will give way to new flesh. On the terrain of my skin, a new map emerges. With cautious fingers you trace the lines: Holy. Welcome. Beloved.