

## Section 7: Advent and Christmas

### **Vignettes: Only 1-2 paragraphs each**

- A. Includes "The ghost of Christmas past" and two others
- B. Includes "Holy Christmas moment" and two others

Inspiring poem for this section:

May God's gracious presence  
    Wrap around you and protect you.  
May the promise of the holy Christ child  
    Forever rest in the curve of your life.  
May the sweet, fearless song of the Holy Spirit  
    Sing you to sleep  
    and awaken you when Advent dawns.  
May you, and those you love and serve,  
    expect the good news  
    Immanuel, God with us. Amen

Jan Richardson

### **A. The ghost of Christmas past**

For years when Halloween rolled around, I started getting angry about Christmas. Most of us have unfinished business with the happy holiday but it's too scrooge-like to grumble or even be honest and dampen the festive mood. Yet the dampened mood within doesn't just go away. The memories resurface. December losses haunt like no other! Deaths, betrayals, separations or divorce, estrangements, job loss, illness, tragedy. I have my own list from years gone by: on Christmas day my mother had serious a brain aneurism, a major love ended the day after Christmas, I had a breast lump removed in mid-December, one of my best friends was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer on Dec 17<sup>th</sup>. We could go on and on. I had...

So God stopped me in my tracks on Halloween one year and assigned me to engage with, reflect on and learn from a character in the nativity scene. What? I was confused at first and was not sure what to do with this instruction. But then I began relishing my assignment and over the years it slowly began to transform Christmas. I've been Joseph, the inn keeper, the cow, the lamp, the wise men/women, Mary, the star, angels, a shepherd, Jesus, the donkey, Herod, the hay, the gifts of the magi. My character keeps popping up during the season to guide me to the spiritual light in the darkness of December. Most recently, I was

the manger. My assignment came from a poem by Barbara Germain, "On being a Manger: Be empty. Be sturdy. Be soft inside. Be still. Be ready."

### **Christmas in prison**

Christmas Eve is usually reserved for private family celebrations. But I had the fortuitous opportunity to be with marginalized families one Christmas when the chaplain at a women's prison where I volunteered asked if my husband and I would like to attend the Christmas Eve service there with the inmates. We said yes.

It was one of the holiest experiences I've had in worship. Just knowing that God was so present to the women and children who attended was precious. Just knowing that some of their stories were very similar to Mary's story; unwed mother, potential outcast, fleeing for her life, delivering a baby in less than desirable circumstances...But the highlight was when a little boy of about three toddled up to the manger, took Jesus out of the manger and started chewing on his feet. No one said or did anything. We just watched in awe. This little boy did what we all may have wanted to do, savor Jesus in as personal a way as possible. Holy Night.

### **How I survive Advent intact (without medical help or counseling)**

I invite a true friend to join me. Get an honest book about the season. Meet weekly to unpack the Advent experience. Give smaller, simpler gifts. Have a budget. Go to just a few events and enjoy them more. Avoid sugar (except dark chocolate). Invite quiet and soft music. Welcome snow. Look for beauty and light. Take walks to stay grounded. Observe children's glee. Be fully present, to fewer people. Love the ones I'm with. Forgive. Embrace my sad memories gently. Kneel at the manger. Receive the gift of love God offers there.

### **B. Holy Christmas moment**

The setting: the Alzheimer's unit at the veterans home on the Friday before Christmas, seated around a table in a private dining room with two barely-there men and their families. I was there to support my friend whose husband was one of the barely-there men. My friend's husband was in his eighties and the other man was only sixty-two. His son was just thirteen years old. The holy moment that moved me beyond words: Thirteen year old Daniel, after reading aloud the deeply moving Christmas card he received from his father (written by his

mother), took his new fleece blanket, climbed into his father's lap in his oversized wheel chair and nuzzled his head into his father's neck. Silent sight. Holy rite.

### **"We all need a Joseph"**

The Joseph of the nativity story is a favorite of mine. He's a hard worker from a small town. He falls in love. He survives a holy scandal by trusting God and his dream life. He acts courageously to protect his family. He remains a stable rock for a lot of people. He is humble and faithful, even when his wife and kid get all the attention. He cares about bigger things than himself. He is a consummate gentleman.

*We all need a Joseph in our lives.* I have one. He's become my artist mentor and also a friend. On the surface there may not be obvious reasons for us to connect. He's southern. I'm northern. He's a man. I'm a woman. He's black, descended from slaves. I'm white, descended from Swedish farmers. We've never even met face to face. But what we do have in common is our love for fiber arts and faith. He's a tapestry artist and I'm an icon maker. We both adore God. My Joseph is stable, humble, supportive, courageous, gently challenging, loving, artistic, encouraging and optimistic. He's a miracle in my life. He's like a ray of sunshine. Maybe that's why his nickname is Sunshine Joe!

### **Where is home?**

Where IS home? Both my concept of family and home have been sources of intense reflection for me over the years. When people ask "Are you going home for Christmas?" it raises the issue again, where's home? For more than 30 years I've had no family home with a parent or sibling. So it raises the question of what is home for me. Conversations, reflections, and spiritual direction have all helped me see that home is a symbol for where we are loved and accepted, where we truly belong and where we can rest and be revitalized. So for me now, home is three things; first it's with those who love and accept me (my dear friends); second it's where I rest and revitalize (my own nest, my condo). Yet primarily home is where God is, which is everywhere in my life, so wherever I am, if I am aware of God—or even if I'm not-- I am home.