



# CURIOUS ABOUT JOY

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*A Retreat for Women's Christmas*

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ALL THIS TIME, JOY  
*A Blessing for Women's Christmas*

In all this dark,  
did you think that  
joy had forgotten you,  
as if you could have  
merely slipped its mind  
while it absconded  
to sit by some other fire?

When all this time,  
joy has been  
singing your name  
to the stars  
that have never ceased  
to shine.

## Introduction

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There is a custom, rooted in Ireland, of celebrating Epiphany (January 6, which brings the Christmas season to a close) as Women's Christmas. Called *Nollaig na mBan* in Irish, Women's Christmas originated as a day when the women, who often carried the domestic responsibilities all year, took Epiphany as an occasion to celebrate together at the end of the holidays, leaving hearth and home to the men for a few hours. Celebrated particularly in County Cork and County Kerry, the tradition is enjoying a revival.

Whether your domestic commitments are many or few, Women's Christmas offers an opportunity to pause and step back from whatever has kept you busy and hurried in the past weeks or months. As the Christmas season ends, this is an occasion both to celebrate with friends and also to spend time in reflection before diving into what this new year will hold.

The Women's Christmas Retreat is offered in that spirit. Within these pages is an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to contemplate where you are in your unfolding path. Mindful of those who traveled to welcome the Christ child and who returned home by another way, we will turn our attention toward questions about our own journey.

### WISE WOMEN ALSO CAME

Long ago, when I was first starting to discover the artist layer of my soul, I sat down to create a collage to use as a greeting card for Epiphany. I found myself imagining who else might have made the journey to welcome Jesus. A trio of women began to take shape, carrying their treasures to offer the child. I named the piece *Wise Women Also Came*.

Years have passed since those wise women showed up in my life. My style as an artist has changed greatly, and my path has taken me across much terrain—some that I had dreamed of, some that I never could have anticipated even in dreams. This image of the wise women continues to travel with me, posing questions that linger with me still.

Lately, many of the wise women's questions have had to do with joy. I am curious about joy. In a time when the anguish of the world can flatten it right out of us, how might we become intent on joy instead of giving up on it? How might it be to approach joy as a practice—one that does not hinge on ignorance of circumstances but staying present in the midst of them? How does celebration—the public face of joy—enable us to keep turning toward the world and each other?

I do not have many answers. What I do have are questions, stories, and a conviction that joy lives in close company with sorrow and suffering, inextricably intertwined in an ongoing conversation that we are called to participate in.

I share some of those stories and questions here, simply by way of inviting you to contemplate how joy shows up for you, or might want to find its way into your life. With reflections and images from my own searching, the pages of this year's retreat offer a space to pray, to imagine, to rest, and to dream about how joy happens for you, and how we might be part of how it happens for others.

## NAVIGATING THE PATH

There are many ways to work with these readings. You can set aside a day on or near Women's Christmas or another time that suits you. You can spread out the reflections over several days or weeks. You might share the retreat with others—a friend, a family member, a small group—and use it as a way to connect in this time, perhaps selecting just one or two of the readings as a starting place for conversation together.

As you move through these pages, you will likely find that different readings invite different kinds of responses. For one reading, you might feel drawn simply to sit in silence or go for a walk. With another reading, you might want to respond with words of your own: a journal entry, a poem, a prose piece, a letter, a prayer. A reading could inspire a collage, or a drawing or painting or sculpture.

With each reflection, as you contemplate the words and the questions—including your own questions that these pages might prompt—I invite you to consider the pieces of your life: the experiences you carry, the scraps of your story, the fragments that seem jagged and painful as well as those you think of as beautiful. What response—in words, in images, in prayer, in movement, in stillness, in conversation, in solitude—helps you recognize and honor the pieces and put them together in a new way, making your path as you go?

## BLESSING OF COMFORT, BLESSING OF CHALLENGE

I pray that in these pages, you will find a space of comfort as well as a space of challenge. If you have arrived feeling weary and depleted, I hope that you will find something here that provides comfort and rest. I hope also that you will find something that stretches you into new terrain, that welcomes you to think or move or pray in a direction that will draw you into uncharted territory in your soul, and there find the God who always waits to meet us in those spaces that lie beyond what is familiar, comfortable, and habitual for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that on the night of Jesus' birth, shepherds arrived at the manger with a story of angels who brought them astounding tidings of a Savior's birth. Luke tells us that all who heard the tale of the shepherds were amazed. *But Mary*, Luke writes—Mary, who would come to know just how closely joy and grief live together—*treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* (2:19).

As you engage this retreat, may you enter into a space where you can gather up the words, the stories, the fragments and pieces, the gifts and challenges of the past year. May you ponder them in your heart and there find treasure to sustain you and illuminate your path. May you have comfort and challenge in good measure, and may you be accompanied by many graces and much joy. Know that I hold you in prayer and wish you blessings on your way. Merry Women's Christmas!



*Finding the Place Where We Can Sing*

## WHERE WE LEARN TO SING

On the southwest coast of Ireland, there is a town that holds my heart. I visited it briefly with a group of friends during my first sojourn to that country. Through some strange and splendid occasions of synchronicity, I have had the opportunity to return there the past four summers to spend a stretch of time writing. The town's beauty and hospitality have made it a place of remarkable solace and good cheer, a particular gift as I worked to dream my way into a new life following Gary's death.

If you are familiar with Ireland, you know that its landscape has held tremendous suffering. The town I visit bears witness to this in its Old Cemetery, where there is a Famine Plot containing the remains of thousands who died during the Great Famine in the 19th century.

There is something about Ireland that can stir deep sorrow for me; I suspect it is simply the nature of the country, that its terrain has a way of inviting whatever grief we may carry to come to the surface. I can get sad in Ireland like nowhere else. When I first experienced this, it prompted dismay and a sense of guilt: *I'm in Ireland! How dare I be sad?* And then one day I realized, *Ireland! What a fantastic place to be sad!* Because for all the sorrow that Ireland can evoke, it also knows a vast amount about what to do with it.

I was talking one evening with a friend who lives in the town, and I asked him about this sense that Ireland has a tremendous capacity to absorb grief and to create from it. He nodded vigorously. Poetry, literature, song, art: this country that has held great suffering has also somehow developed an astonishing range and depth of practices that have helped transform its pain. This kind of transformation does not attempt to explain away the trauma or to hide its lingering effects; it does not romanticize it or seek to turn it into something noble. Instead, its long devotion to well-honed creative practices has enabled it to enter into its collective and personal tragedies, to work with them, to clear space within them for something else to come through—something that rises up as celebration, as fierce connection, as joy that, though often complicated and haunted by history, endures even in the midst of ongoing grief.

Ireland has been a place that has helped me pursue those practices in my own life, those ways I work on my ability to hold what comes—the sorrow and loss as well as the wonder and gladness that so often inhabit the same space. It has been a place that reminds me that our capacity for joy relies on more than a particular mood or emotion, a disposition over which we do not always have much control. Opening to joy means being willing to let the world enter us, to let it break our hearts, but not to remain overwhelmed by the breaking. It asks that instead of turning away, we find those places where we can engage, can create, can offer what is uniquely ours to offer; those places where we learn to sing amid the brokenness, in celebration of all that goes deeper still.

*In times of pain, has there been a place that has helped you engage what is painful and find what else lives within it? Are there people who have held joy for you when you could not find it for yourself? Do you have a creative practice that makes room for transformation to happen, where what is broken comes together in a new way?*



## How Joy Works

You could not stop it  
if you tried—  
how this blessing  
begins to sing  
every time it sees  
your face,  
how it turns itself  
in wonder  
merely at the mention  
of your name.

It is simply  
how joy works,  
going out to you  
when you least expect,  
running up to meet you  
when you had not thought  
to ask.





*Shall Come Home with Joy*

## HOME WITH REJOICING

*Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

—Psalm 126:6

Visiting with friends a few weeks ago, at the edge of Advent. Talking on the porch as the evening gathers around us. One among us speaks of the great storm he has been going through for some years. *I believe in the providence and care of God*, he tells us. *But if you could just pray that God would take his foot off my neck.*

All around us, there are reminders that for many—and perhaps for us, ourselves—this is a time in which joy can be elusive. Economic pressures, broken relationships, disasters, violence, illness, isolation: these do not abide by a holiday schedule.

And alongside this awareness, Psalm 126 sidles up, offering its vivid images of rejoicing, restoration, return. The psalmist remembers what God has done for God's people: *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion*, he exults, *we were like those who dream.... The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.* But then time shifts for the psalmist, his remembrance of restoration past becoming a prayer for rejoicing yet to come: *Restore our fortunes, O Lord*, he pleads. *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*

Perhaps more than any other time in the liturgical year, the span of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany possesses the sort of already-but-not-yet quality that the writer evokes in this psalm. Even as we remember and celebrate the Christ who came to us, we are called also to anticipate his promised return. This can be a difficult tension to navigate, especially when it may seem that Christ left so much undone in his earthly life and is tarrying overlong in completing his work of restoration.

These seasons do not seek to release God from culpability for coming up with a cosmic design that leaves so much to be desired. They are an invitation, however, to stretch ourselves toward God's sense of time, to reach into that realm where God has already brought about the healing of the world in the way that Mary sang about in her Magnificat that we recently heard during Advent (Luke 1:46-55).

These days invite us to push at the limits of linear time and press into the place where the *already* intersects with the *not yet*. One of the ways we do this is by seeking to discern how God is calling us to participate in bringing restoration into reality: to learn to look at the world through the eyes of a God who has already somehow, in some realm, made it whole, and then to look for how God is asking us to help bring about that wholeness now.

We lean into God's sense of time also by following the psalmist's example of rejoicing, which is much more than a sensation of happiness. The rejoicing that the psalmist writes of is a practice, a habit, a way of being that does not depend solely on external events. It does not involve ignoring the pain that is present in the world. It means, rather, seeing the world as it is and choosing to celebrate the presence of beauty and relationship within it. It asks us to develop a capacity for hope and to work toward what we hope for—and what God hopes for in and through us.

*How does joy find you in the between-times where your hoping and dreaming are still in progress? What might it look like for joy to be a practice that you cultivate rather than something you wait for? When life is overwhelming for so many, in complicated ways that can tempt us to feel powerless, what might be one thing you can do to ease the pain that someone else carries? What might be the next thing you can do after that?*

## BLESSING TO SUMMON REJOICING

When your weeping  
has watered  
the earth.

When the storm  
has been long  
and the night  
and the season  
of your sorrowing.

When you have seemed  
an exile  
from your life,  
lost in the far country,  
a long way from where  
your comfort lies.

When the sound  
of splintering  
and fracture  
haunts you.

When despair  
attends you.

When lack.  
When trouble.  
When fear.  
When pain.

When empty.  
When lonely.  
When too much  
of what depletes you  
and not enough  
of what restores  
and rests you.

Then let there be  
rejoicing.

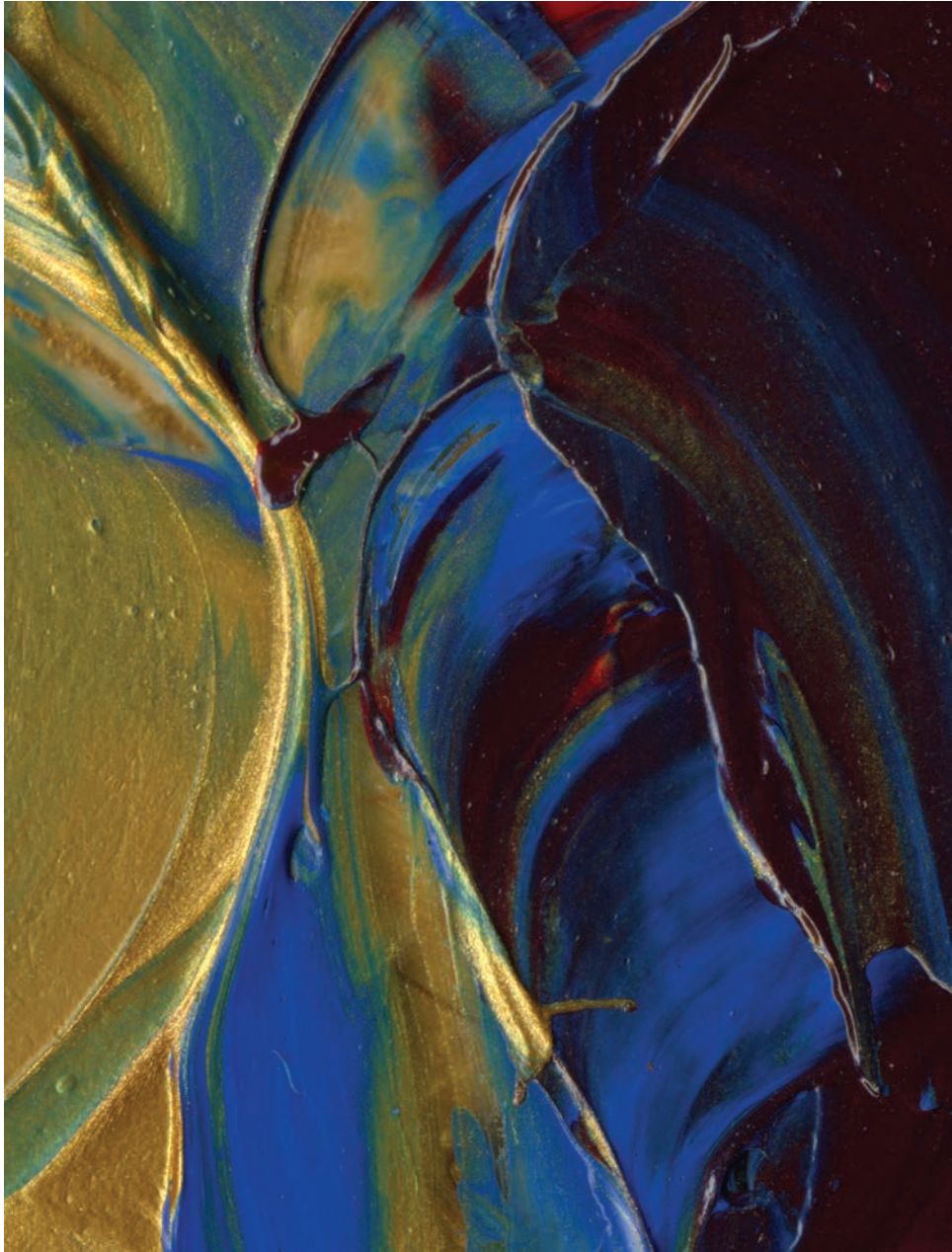
Then let there be  
dreaming.

Let there be  
laughter in your mouth  
and on your tongue  
shouts of joy.

Let the seeds  
soaked by tears  
turn to grain,  
to bread,  
to feasting.

Let there be  
coming home.





*For Joy*

## FOR JOY

*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,  
the child in my womb leaped for joy.*

—Luke 1:44

I am enchanted and challenged by how Elizabeth immediately knows, without being told, what has happened; how she welcomes Mary and provides sanctuary for this young, pregnant, unmarried woman; how she enfolds her with a blessing; how this blessing calls forth Mary's stunning song about the God who redeems, remembers, restores.

I am especially drawn to the way that Elizabeth recognizes Mary. Sees her. Knows what has happened, what Mary has just agreed to. So deep is Elizabeth's recognition of Mary that even the child in her womb can feel it, and leaps for sheer delight.

In Africa, there is a Zulu greeting that goes like this: *I see you.*

If you want to let someone know that you recognize them, that you have taken the time to notice them, that you honor how unique they are in all the world, that their presence is a cause for celebration, this is what you say.

*I see you.*

This seeing, this recognition, is the stuff that joy is made of. And heartbreak, too, for seeing comes with a cost. But that place of seeing—that place where we know, where we refuse to be content with appearances, where we resist the impulse to take things for granted: this is where God lives, and where Christ is born anew.

*In this season, who might need you to say, like Elizabeth, I see you, and to know the joy that comes with this? Where might you offer this gift of recognition, this blessing that will help free someone, like Mary, to speak the word that only they can speak?*

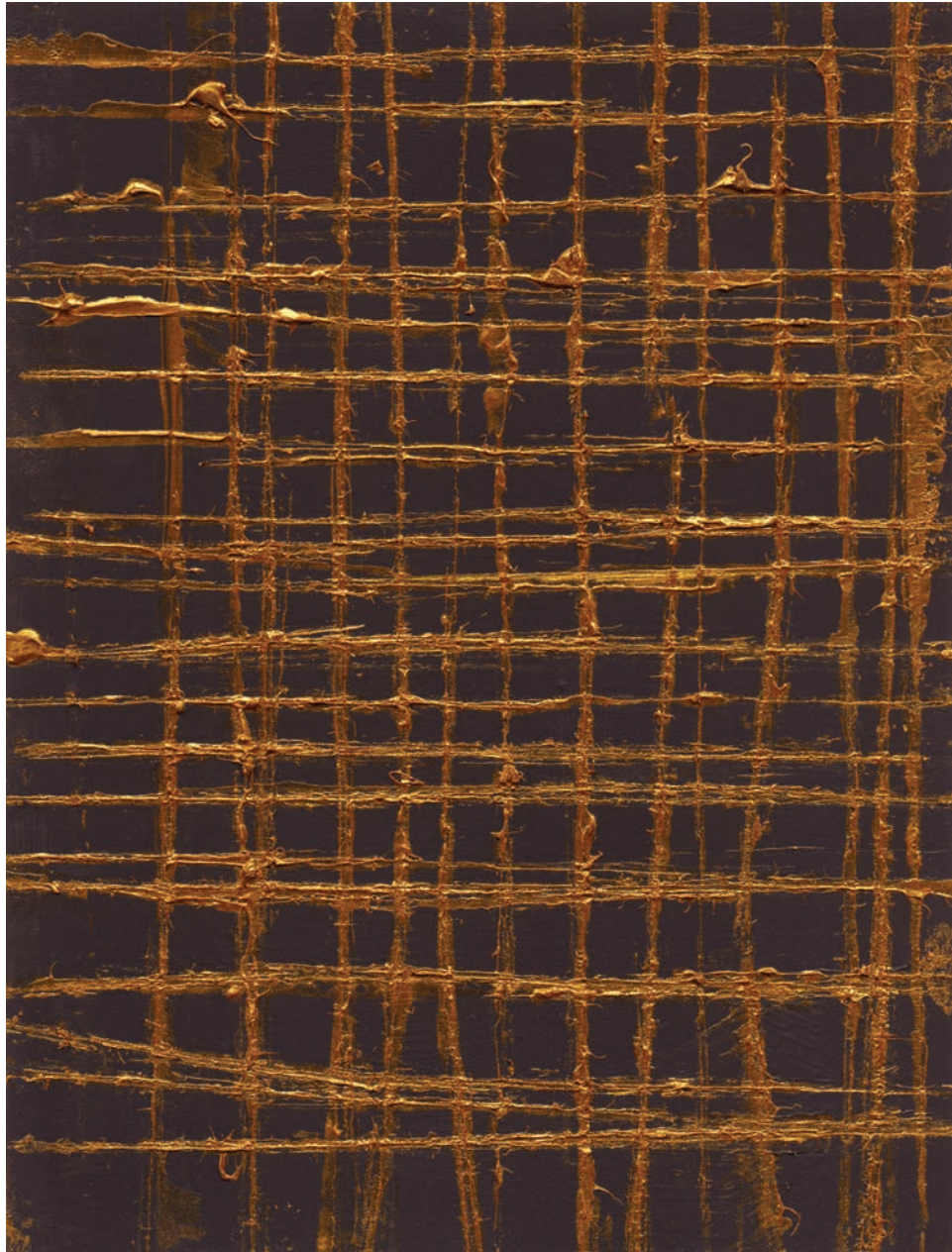
## FOR JOY

You can prepare,  
but still  
it will come to you  
by surprise,

crossing through your doorway,  
calling your name in greeting,  
turning like a child  
who quickens suddenly  
within you.

It will astonish you  
how wide your heart  
will open  
in welcome

for the joy  
that finds you  
so ready  
and still so  
unprepared.



*Joy Is What We Make Together*



## A COMPLICATED JOY

Every occasion of joy I can think of is linked to an experience of connection. If I were to make a map of my joys, to trace a path of the points where it has entered my life, every X on that map would mark a location where some kind of relationship has been at work—where I have connected with another person or with a place, or where I have been visited with the understanding that I belonged to something larger than myself, and I knew in my bones that I was not alone.

Joy loves company. It depends on relationships, on becoming larger than itself. It is full of doors that have the power to open when we least expect and to draw us where we did not imagine to go.

Even as joy thrives on connection, it can sometimes seem fragile or fleeting when our sense of connection falters. We know the things that can chip away at what holds us together, how joy can become more difficult to find amid all the ways that pain manifests in the world and in our own lives.

Joy can get complicated. Our lives grow convoluted. So often, when joy comes to us, it is accompanied by other emotions that seem to be in conflict but somehow enter our lives all mixed together: *joy and sorrow and gratitude and grief and...*

Yet when I think about joy being complicated, I am thinking not only about how it frequently has to make its way to us in the midst of other emotions. *A complicated joy* has to do with an older sense of what *complicate* means. *Complicate* has its roots in Latin words that mean *to fold together*, as when a recipe calls for an ingredient to be incorporated into the mix: an intentional introduction of a substance that is brought into concert with everything else in the bowl. The word refers to more than simply combining things; it gets at how they become intertwined and entangled.

When it comes to joy being complicated, it's not just that it is so much of a piece with sorrow and other emotions, so bound together that they cannot be separated again. It's that *we* are bound together, linked together, folded together so inextricably that we are forever altered. *A complicated joy* means that joy is born of those connections. It means that our joy is not isolated from that of others. It means we hold joy for one another when it is hard to hold it for ourselves.

This kind of joy recognizes the realities of the world; it does not come from naiveté or from ignoring what makes this life hard. We see this with wondrous clarity in the stories that accompany us in the seasons of Advent and Christmas. When Elizabeth calls out in welcome to Mary, and the child she is carrying leaps with joy; when Mary raises her voice in the Magnificat; when Zechariah sings his canticle; when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the temple, and the prophets Anna and Simeon cry out in recognition and delight—in every case, these people are not unmindful of the state of the world. Each one gives the impression that the joy that courses through them, that radiates from them, is a habit and a practice; that it's something to which they have routinely made themselves available, not by resisting the world but by entering more deeply into it, so that they can welcome the God who shows up in the midst of it.

The joy that animates the characters of Advent and Christmas is something distinctly other than a personal joy they have hoarded in their own private reserve. This is the joy that infuses creation. They have developed a capacity to tap into it, to let it enter them, to tangle itself up with them. They have allowed it to complicate things in the way that matters most. They know that joy is what becomes possible when we turn toward one another; that it is a blessing we make together.

*When has joy entered into a time that was tangled? Whom do you think of when you think of joy? If you were to make a map of your joys, where are some of the places you would mark with an X? What do you notice as you remember those places?*

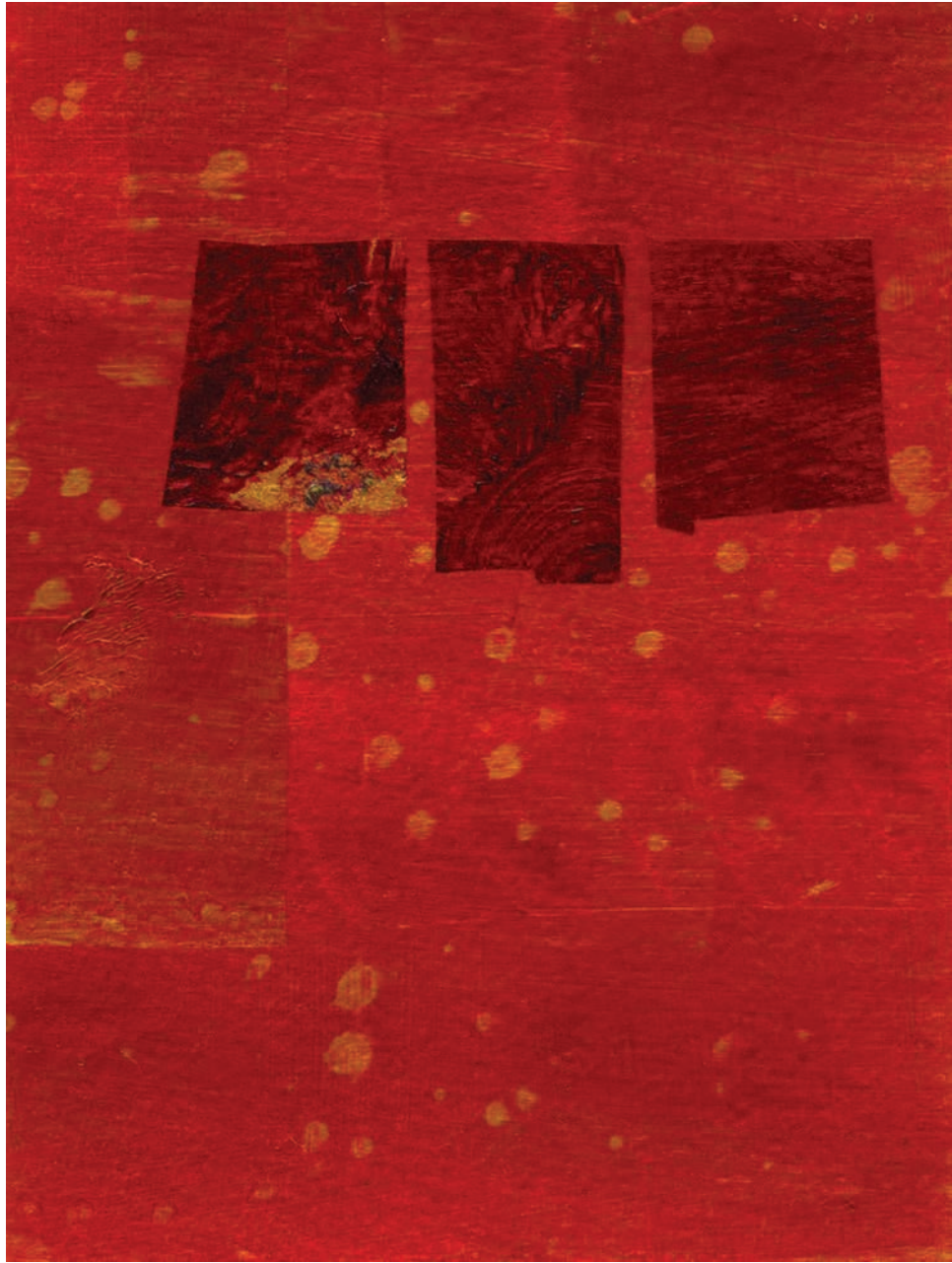


## TANGLED

I do not know  
any mercy  
but that it comes  
to us tangled,  
any blessing  
but that it comes  
to us bound with  
every other thing.

Praise  
to the tangle.  
Praise  
to the knots.

Praise  
to the love  
that travels  
a complicated way  
and to the joy  
that meets us  
twined,  
spiraling in its  
intricate delight.



*Love and Revelation*

## THE WEDDING HOUSE

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.

*How does joy happen in community for you—those places where two or more are gathered in welcome? Where might you make a space to find this or to offer it? Whom do you seek out in times of gladness or of grief?*

### BLESSING

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.

## INTERLUDE

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### *Wise Women Also Came*

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.  
They came in quiet,  
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.



*When Friends Rejoice Both Far and Near*



## IN CELEBRATION

One day while I was in seminary, I heard Jim Wallis speak at a worship service. Jim was one of the founders of the Sojourners community, and he told us a story about a colleague from Sojourners who went to Central America to serve in a village there. The community faced enormously difficult challenges, and Jim's colleague worked constantly, laboring day and night to help bring change to this village.

One day, some of the people in the community came to her. *Why do you not join us in our fiestas?* they asked. *Why do you not come to sit with us on our porches in the evening?*

*There's too much to do!* the woman replied. *I don't have enough time.*

*Oh,* they said to her. *You're one of those.*

*One of whose?* the woman asked.

*You are one of those who come to us and work and work and work,* they said. *Soon you will grow tired, and you will leave. The ones who stay—they are the ones who have learned to sit with us on our porches in the evening and who come to our fiestas.*

Jim Wallis said that his colleague took the story to heart. She went to the fiestas. She sat with her friends on their porches in the evening. She became quite the party animal, in fact. And when Jim told us the story, she was still there.

So often we treat what is most life-giving as the least consequential, somehow less deserving than our "real" work. Song, art, poetry, dance, community, the sheer pleasure of being together—all the ways we celebrate, all the ways we embody hope, all the ways we bear witness to the God who is still creating in and through us: how frequently do we treat these as luxuries, turning to them only if we have time enough, energy enough, resources enough after everything else has been done? How often do we wait until we have joy enough, light enough, inclination enough?

If this season teaches us anything, it is that even in the dark there is cause to celebrate. Even in sorrow. Even in lack. Even when there is too much to do. Even when we don't feel like it. These days assure us that if we have lost hope, there are those who are hoping for us. If we are in darkness, Christ seeks us even there. If we are aching for light, it is on its way. If we are weary, there is a fiesta waiting for us, and friends to rejoice with, both far and near.

*It can naturally become difficult to celebrate when we are too tired, too busy, too overwhelmed by the state of the world or the circumstances of our own lives. This is when it becomes especially important to be with those who will stoke our hope and remind us that our lives are bound together. What helps you do this, whether with intention or spontaneously? In the year ahead, how might you make room for celebration?*

## WHAT FIRE COMES TO SING IN YOU

This blessing  
had big ideas  
about what it wanted  
to say,  
what it wanted you  
to know,  
to see.

This blessing wanted  
to open your eyes  
to the joy that lives  
in such strange company  
with sorrow—  
wanted to make sure  
to tell you,  
lest you forget,  
that no matter how long  
it seems absent,  
no matter how quiet  
it becomes,  
joy has never  
been far from you,  
holding a space  
of celebration,  
watching for you,  
humming as it  
keeps vigil.

But now that  
it comes time  
to speak it—  
comes time to  
lay these words  
on your brow,  
your beating heart—  
all this blessing  
can think to say is

*Look—  
your life  
a candle,  
this day  
a match.  
Strike it and see  
what blazes,  
what fire comes  
to sing in you.*





*As on a Day of Festival*

## AS ON A DAY OF FESTIVAL

From time to time, someone will look at a piece of my art and ask, *So what does it mean?* As if meaning were the main thing. Or as if it could mean only one thing.

I cannot tell you what this one means. I can tell you that as I worked on it in the night, the lamps on either side of my drafting table the only illumination in my studio, I was thinking of a constellation of Advent readings from the prophets and from Paul. I was thinking of *with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation* and of *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding*. I was thinking about the words *rejoice* and *exult* and *sing*; the words *proclaim* and *praise*.

I was thinking how Paul and the prophets do not tell us to be happy; they do not talk in terms of feelings; they do not talk about mood or about dispositions that are dependent on circumstances. I was thinking about how they call us to a rejoicing that is not an emotion but an action, a choice. I was thinking about all those verbs they use, those words that impel us to move and to resist allowing ourselves to become stuck.

I was thinking of how joy is not something we summon from inside ourselves but something that visits us. Calls to us. Asks us to open, to unfurl ourselves as it approaches. Like Mary in the presence of the angel, her *yes* poised to fall from her lips.

And I can tell you that on the scrap of paper I had placed beneath the collage as I pieced it together, I penciled the words of this blessing between the streaks of glue left behind.

## AS ON A DAY OF FESTIVAL

Call it  
the waters of salvation  
or the garlands of gladness.

Call it  
the grave-clothes  
falling away  
or call it the loosing  
of the chains.

Call it  
what binds us together:  
fierce but  
fragile but  
fierce.

Call it  
*he will rejoice over you*  
*with gladness;*

call it  
*he will renew you  
in his love;*  
call it  
*he will exult over you  
with loud singing  
as on a day  
of festival.*

Call it  
the thin, thin place  
where the veil  
gives way.

Or call it this:  
the path we make  
when we go deep  
and deeper still  
into the dark  
and look behind to see  
the way has been lit  
by our rejoicing.

*Inspired by Zephaniah 3:14–20, Isaiah 12:2–6, and Philippians 4:4–7.*



*Poured into Our Hearts*



## SOMEHOW A BLESSING

How would it be to bless this place, these gaps? In some ways I feel like that's what so much of my life and my work and my writing has been about these past few years. Blessing the painful places. Blessing the broken places. Blessing the places of aching and rending. Blessing the places of anger and of sorrow that feels nearly unspeakable. But to speak it. How this in itself is an act of blessing. To speak the sorrow. To speak into the sorrow. To let the sorrow itself speak, to let it have its say even when I don't want to hear anymore, can hardly bear to hear what it has to say, pouring from the inside of my bones, pounding in my beating heart.

And in the pouring, somehow a blessing. And in the pounding of my heart, somehow a blessing. And in the gaps, somehow a blessing that gathers itself even now, that has been gathering itself for ages, that will never stop.

*There is something about speaking our sorrow and our pain that helps clear a way for joy. The speaking does not erase the pain, but it can make a path through it, a space for us to move and to breathe. Do you have a place to do this? How do you hold this space for someone else? What gaps might need you to speak a word of blessing and declare that joy can enter?*

## BLESSING IN THE TURNING

*You have turned my mourning  
into dancing.*

—Psalm 30:11

May you know  
the slow mystery  
in which mourning  
becomes a dance,  
turning you toward  
the gladness  
that wants to meet you  
in your grief.

May comfort  
come to enfold you,  
not to take away  
all sorrow  
but to infuse it  
with tenderness,  
with rest,  
with every grace  
it has.

May you give yourself  
to the rhythms  
of joy,  
even when your steps  
are stumbling,  
even when you are  
most fragile  
and faltering.

May you know  
the dancing that comes  
in the dying,  
moving you in time with  
the heart that  
has held you  
always,  
even when you  
could not hear  
its beating,  
even when you  
could not bear  
its love.



*Every Given Light*



## FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

We are dancing in the streets of the city of my college years. The downtown is lit up for the holidays, and the music blares as our feet repeatedly hit the hard surface of the street. Tomorrow we will long for hot baths to soak the soreness from our legs, but tonight we are dancing at the Festival of Lights.

In the years to come I will learn how necessary it is to keep dancing, how celebration is not a luxury but a staple of life, how in the grimmest moments I will need to take myself down to the closest festival at hand. I will go not to drown my sorrow or to mask my despair or to ignore the real suffering of the world or of my own self. I will go to beat out the message with my feet that in the darkness we are dancing, and while we are weeping we are dancing, and our legs are aching but we are dancing. And under the night sky we are dancing; lighting a match to the shadows, we are dancing; starting to sing when they have stopped the music, we are dancing; sending shock waves with our feet to the other side of the world, we are dancing still.

*Who might need you to invite them to their own personal Festival of Lights, no matter how small—to light a candle with them, to sing, to dance, to remind them they are not alone?*

### EVERY GIVEN LIGHT

There are days  
we think  
only so much  
is given—  
a glint,  
a gleam,  
a light so small  
we could carry it  
in the palm of  
our hand,  
just enough  
to let us see  
the next step,  
perhaps,  
into the mystery.

There are days  
grace comes  
but in shadow,  
days it gathers itself  
into the corners,

days it seems  
to turn its gaze  
sidelong  
as if distracted,  
or pondering,  
or paused.

Let it be said  
this is not  
that day.

This is the day  
when grace  
gives out  
its radiance,  
declaring itself  
to everything  
in sight.

This is the day  
when every given light  
bears forth  
like a star,  
turning its face  
toward us with  
the brilliance  
that was there  
all along,  
that it had saved  
just for us,  
just for the joy  
of seeing us  
shine.

## POSTSCRIPT

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### *The Year as a House*

Think of the year  
as a house:  
door flung wide  
in welcome,  
threshold swept  
and waiting,  
a graced spaciousness  
opening and offering itself  
to you.

Let it be blessed  
in every room.  
Let it be hallowed  
in every corner.  
Let every nook  
be a refuge  
and every object  
set to holy use.

Let it be here  
that safety will rest.  
Let it be here  
that health will make its home.  
Let it be here  
that peace will show its face.  
Let it be here  
that love will find its way.

Here  
let the weary come,  
let the aching come,  
let the lost come,  
let the sorrowing come.

Here  
let them find their rest,  
and let them find their soothing,  
and let them find their place,  
and let them find their delight.

And may it be  
in this house of a year  
that the seasons will spin in beauty,  
and may it be  
in these turning days  
that time will spiral with joy.

And may it be  
that its rooms will fill  
with ordinary grace  
and light spill from every window  
to welcome the stranger home.

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