

CHRISTMAS IN THREE ACTS

Tragedy, Comedy, & Fairytale

By **Danielle Strickland** and **World Vision**

Artwork by **Scott Erickson**



INFANTUM

World Vision

INTRODUCTION FROM DANIELLE STRICKLAND

Christmas seems to surprise me every year. I'm never ready for it. Which is why Advent is such a great idea! I love the preparation process as a way to ready myself for the arrival of Jesus into this world. It's helpful to remember the realities of that first arrival and foster an anticipation for "God with us" in our time, context, and space. In this season of pandemic, elections, divisions, conflict, and disasters, it seems like just the right time to set our hearts and minds on the person of Jesus. The only One who has eternity to give us—and the only One who can match our fear with love and settle the conflict that rages within and without His holy peace.

So, that's what this is for. If you are like any of the leaders I've connected with during these last six months, you're exhausted. All of us are busy and afraid and out of control. And that's okay. Because God's calling is not for us to have control. It's to relinquish it at the feet of the King of Kings. **This prayer guide is for you to use and to share with others as a way of focusing, in the midst of the chaos, on the One who really matters. Jesus.**

The guide is in three acts. I've taken the structure from Frederick Buechner's book, *Telling The Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairytale*, which has been a source of comfort and inspiration to me for my whole ministry. Far from a Hallmark® invitation to fake it 'till we make it this Christmas, this prayer guide teams up with the *Honest Advent* material from Scott Erickson and the Infinitum postures of surrender, generosity, and mission to help us take a deeper look at the story. To tell the truth. To embrace the beautiful mess that is our lives, held by God. So, let the angels sing a little louder, let the saints join in one song, Jesus is born—hope for the world!





AUTHOR AND JUSTICE ADVOCATE DANIELLE STRICKLAND

Danielle is a spiritual leader, justice advocate, communicator, and peacemaker. Her aggressive compassion has served people firsthand in countries all over the world—from establishing justice departments and church plants, to launching global anti-trafficking initiatives, to creating new initiatives to mobilize people toward transformational spiritual life. Danielle trains, advocates, and inspires people to live differently through initiatives like Amplify Peace, Brave Global, Infinitum, and the Women Speakers Collective. Her podcast is listened to by thousands globally, and closer to home, she’s on the teaching team at The Meeting House. Currently based in Toronto, Canada, Danielle is the proud mom of three boys, wife to Stephen, and as an Enneagram Seven, has been affectionately called the “Ambassador of Fun.”



Learn more about **Infinitum** and how to get connected at infinitumlife.com.



INTRODUCTION FROM SCOTT ERICKSON

For too many of us, the celebration of Christmas has lost its wonder. Maybe for you it has become a bittersweet season of complicated family rituals, or a predictable, brand-masking, unquenchable consumerism, or simply a sacred story that feels far from any relevance in our current, chaotic world.

When we sift through the accumulated centuries of traditions built around the Christmas story, we see that the Divine appeared in the world through the womb of a humble teenage girl. **That is to say, God incarnated into our world through human vulnerability, and is still incarnating in that exact same way.**

We often forget that the encounter with the incarnate Christ happens in unexpected places, like a pregnancy announcement in a time of political unrest, the morning sickness of a new mom, or the shocking biology of home birth that goes far beyond the sanitized brand of Christmas as we know it.

This prayer guide's postures of surrender, generosity, and mission are an embodied reminder that God-with-us is still incarnating today—in our unexpected change of plans, our unaccomplished dreams, our unforeseen message in the stars, our humble new beginnings.



ARTWORK BY SCOTT ERICKSON

Scott Erickson is a touring painter, performance artist, and creative curate who mixes autobiography, aesthetics, and comedic narrative to create experiences that speak to our deepest stories.

The art within this prayer guide is from Scott's devotional *Honest Advent*, including 25 days of heart-stirring imagery and thought-provoking meditations to rekindle the wonder of God-with-us in this season. Learn more at honestadvent.com.

Learn more about Scott at scottericksonart.com or follow him on Instagram [@scottthepainter](https://www.instagram.com/scottthepainter).



3-WEEK PRAYER JOURNEY

Watch this 2-minute video from Danielle Strickland as she demonstrates the Infinitum prayer postures, and how she practices them every day.



WEEK 1

Tragedy & the Posture of Surrender



WEEK 2

Comedy & the Posture of Generosity



WEEK 3

Fairytale & the Posture of Mission



We curated a Spotify playlist of our favorite worship songs as a way to incorporate music into your time in prayer: [Listen here](#), or search for World Vision's Hope Over Fear playlist!



TRAGEDY & THE POSTURE OF SURRENDER



The practice of *Visio Divina*, “divine seeing” in Latin, invites reflection on our life and the Divine through the use of visual art.

Look at the image, let’s wonder together:

What stands out the most to you in this image?

If you could give this art a title, what would it be?

How could we use this image and our words to talk with someone about sorrow at Christmas?

TRAGEDY

Backdrop of pressure, grief, violence, and fear

MATTHEW 2:13-18

“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.” —Matthew 2:18 (NIV)

One of the wonders of the Christmas story is the context it happens in. The backdrop of Advent is misery and pain, occupation and violence. The events are laced with fear. We forget this in our rush to “hallmark” Christmas into a feel-good buffet. We want desperately for Christmas to be a hot-chocolate-sipping, gift-giving, positive-vibes, family-cheer kind of affair. But it’s important to pay attention. It is no mistake. The backdrop of the events around Jesus coming to this world are a central part of the story.

The Scriptures say that at just the right time Jesus arrived on the scene (see Romans 5:6). And that right time was in the middle of a desperate occupation, after 400 years since the last prophetic word was spoken to a people who were normalized in their own oppression. A time where kings were tyrants and religious leaders, politicians, and people were just trying



to survive. Hope was a faint glimmer at best, but most dreams of being rescued had been snuffed out long ago in most people's everyday life.

Was that the right time?

I think so.

The prophet Isaiah hints at this kind of backdrop for the announcement of Jesus saying, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. ..." (Isaiah 9:2, NIV). Is there any better way to emphasize the light than in the darkest of nights?

The part of the Christmas story that gets missed almost every single year is the part where Herod orders every male infant slaughtered after he learns about the prophecy of the birth of the King of the Jews. There was great weeping in the town where Jesus was born. Great weeping indeed. Death, violence, oppression, tyranny, injustice, and pain. Lots and lots of pain.

And in missing this essential part of the story we often miss the best parts, too. We miss it because we think that the good news is only good if it changes our circumstances, or if it is packaged in ribbons and bows, or if it is easy to swallow and simple to understand. But it isn't. The good news comes to us in the form of God's presence **RIGHT SMACK IN THE MIDDLE** of the muck and the mire. Jesus arrives in human flesh in those very circumstances of grief, pain, and hardship that we can **NEVER** understand or reconcile. And He's still arriving there today. **God with us.**

What is required in the midst of this backdrop is not to paint it out of the story because it's so very hard to reconcile or understand. The invitation God gives us is to recognize that the "right time" for us to encounter and surrender to the ultimate plan of redemption for us and this world is right in the middle of it. The mystery of Jesus' birth is not just about supernatural wonders like the virgin birth and the rearranged galaxy to highlight a stable in an obscure part of a tiny nation that would alter history, it's also about the time and place and people He came to. It's about how He came, when He came, and what that means to us right now.

A "Blue Christmas" is usually a way of recognizing that Christmas holds a lot of pain for many people. Grief and loss, childhood trauma and irreconcilable pain in the midst of what is supposed to be the "hap, happiest season of all." But it's a very biblical thing to do. The whole Christmas story was a blue one—right from the start. And what do you do with that kind of angst?

You bear it **WITH CHRIST**. You invite the Jesus of Nazareth who chose that exact time in our history to come to us, to dwell with us, to weep with us, **to be with us!** So instead of rehashing the stories of the nativity by rote, why don't we start off this guide with some honest Advent reflections?



THE POSTURE OF SURRENDER

Transforming my mind, will, body, and emotions

What is hard about this Christmas?

Who are you grieving for or with right now?

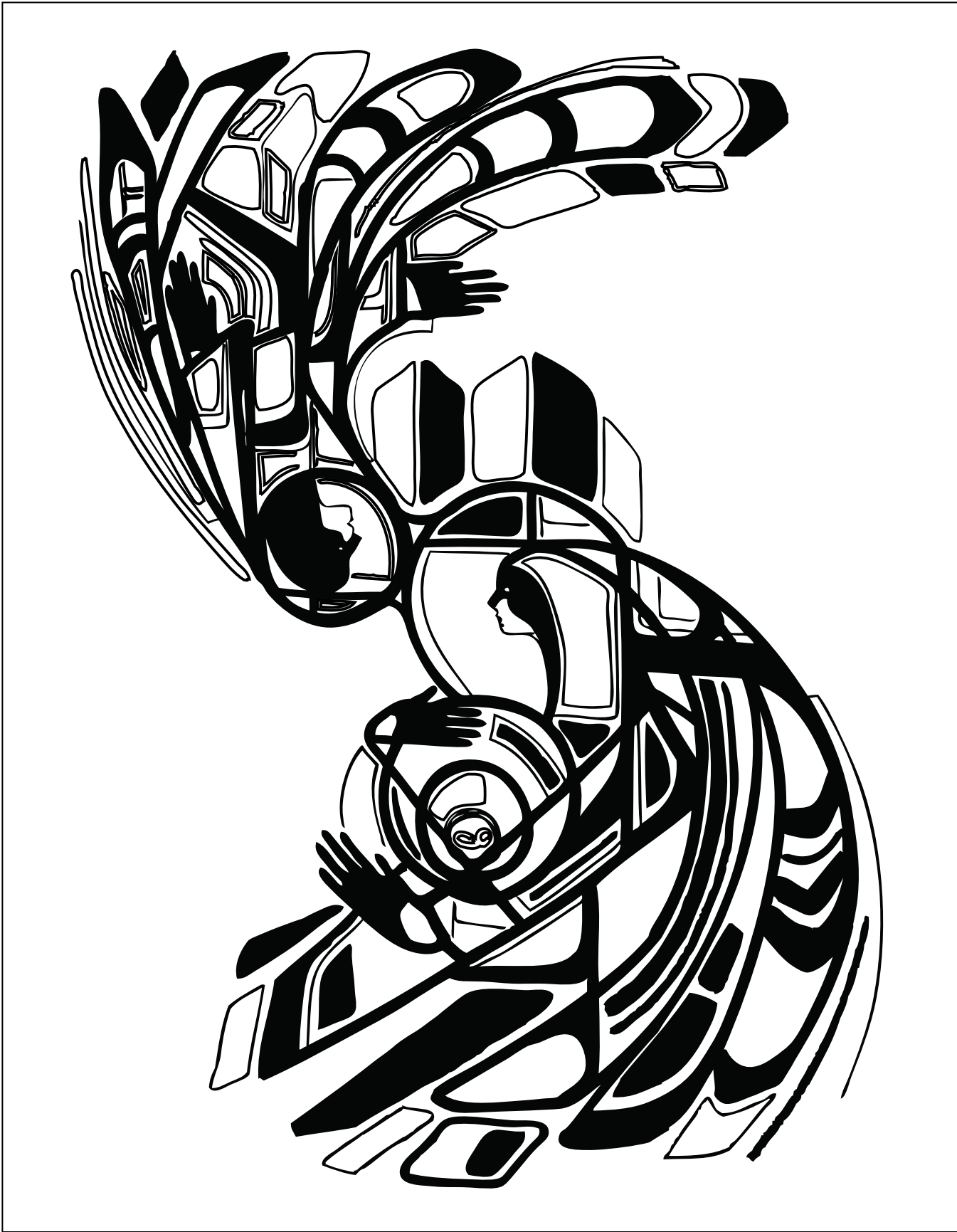
Where have you encountered a loss of hope?

What about your current circumstances seems irreconcilable with good news?

The act of surrender is the most dangerous posture we can hold. It is simultaneously an admission of our complete and utter hopelessness to change anything (about this world and about ourselves), and at the same time a declaration that we trust that God is more powerful than us and greater than all the forces at work in this world! God can take over our lives. God can have control here. God can come be with me—even if I don't understand, even if my questions may never be resolved. That kind of surrender is much harder than we think. It's also much more powerful than we can imagine.



COLORING PRAYER Artwork by Scott Erickson



WEEK 1: LIVING OUT SURRENDER



I choose to hold up my hands as a symbol of surrender. My life is not about me. I surrender to Your Lordship. I surrender my preferences, prejudices, and position to You. My fears, finances, friends, and family to You.

Day 1: Matthew 11:25–30

I choose to surrender all my circumstances to You, even when I'm experiencing tragedy.

Day 2: Luke 12:22–26

I choose to surrender my attempts at control, which I often hold so tightly.

Day 3: Isaiah 46

I choose to surrender my desires and plans, offering all that I am and everything I do for Your glory.

Day 4: Psalm 46

I choose to surrender all my stress and anxiety in this season, knowing that You bring rest and renewal.

Day 5: 2 Chronicles 20

I choose to surrender my life and future to You, trusting in You this day and seeking Your voice.

PUT THE POSTURE OF SURRENDER IN ACTION

Find a place that gives you some peace and perspective. Traveling to spaces that are “bigger than you” generates the opportunity for wonder, awe, and perspective. Even if your journey to one of these places takes a while, this might be an important step to the experience.

Once you've arrived, take a few minutes to still your heart and mind. What do you see? What do you hear?

Reflection questions:

1. What attitudes or behaviors of yours need surrendering this Advent?
2. What's one way you can incorporate this posture of surrender into your daily life?



COMEDY & THE POSTURE OF GENEROSITY



The practice of *Visio Divina*, “divine seeing” in Latin, invites reflection on our life and the Divine through the use of visual art.

Look at the image, let’s wonder together:

What brings you joy?

What makes it difficult to allow laughter and comedy to be part of your story?

How could we use this image and our words to talk with someone about joy this Christmas?

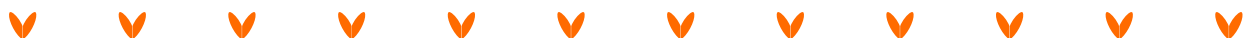
COMEDY

Invited guests, and the overthrow of ridiculous proportions

LUKE 1:26-38

The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”
—Luke 1:28 (NIV)

Sometimes I get the idea that God has placed me in a divine comedy. I mean, if I just think about the ways that God has invited me to participate in His kingdom coming to earth it truly is funny. Once, I invaded a brothel with a grandma who brought cupcakes (it’s a long story but trust me, it’s funny). I met a really important world leader of a denomination on a big stage in front of thousands of people and when we embraced our bobby pins stuck together! I’m not even joking. Of all the people He could have chosen, He chose me. The least qualified, the most unlikely, the one who so often gets it wrong. And in case you haven’t noticed, the Advent story is filled with this divine comedy. Literally laugh-out-loud moments where you sense God’s benevolent wink of grace-filled approval. It’s an upside-down kingdom He is unearthing.



One moment that strikes me as particularly joy-filled and really quite hilarious is the moment when Mary goes to Elizabeth to deal with the news of her newfound condition. It's funny on so many levels. Mary has been chosen by God as a divine instrument through which to partner in bringing God to earth. A woman. A virgin. A young girl. Mary's song is one of the most inflammatory passages of Scripture you will ever read (and has been banned in places because of its fiery rhetoric), and yet it is also saturated in divine-cheeky comedy. "God chose me?! What?!" It's the biggest, most ridiculous, hilarious decision of the cosmic order. God has a plan to redeem the entire human race and the created order and He chose. . . (drum roll) the most insignificant person He could find.

Now, I mean no disrespect to Mary, quite the opposite. God didn't choose her in spite of her social standing, or age, or gender, or situation. He chose her BECAUSE of them. He chose her to display HIS power. I imagine God winking at the legions of angels as He sends Gabriel with the message. The Scriptures suggest in Revelation that there is a lot of fuss and noise in the heavenlies over this event. To be sure, I can hear in my spirit the sound of singing, and shouting, and a whole lot of laughter! This is God's plan? Indeed.

To confirm this as the plan of God, the angel tells Mary that another birth is going to happen to another woman at the opposite end of the social spectrum in age and standing (religious leader's wife, too old to get pregnant). And even though this woman is married to a priest (and a good one at that), the priest cannot believe it. Has anyone seen a good Shakespeare comedy? The one guy who could explain everything to the people who are trying to understand what on earth is going on CANNOT TALK. People, this is funny.

And this is part of the nature of this story of Jesus entering the world. **It's packaged in joy.** It's funny, because He chooses the most unlikely, ill-qualified, confused people to work with and through. And yes, I'm thinking about you! And me. We are invited into a divine comedy that is not making fun of us—no, it is inviting us to the party, to belly laugh with God. Psalm 2 asks why the leaders and rulers plot in vain against the God of Heaven. Do they not know the Lord sits in heaven and laughs?! God has a plan, through the person of Jesus, that will unleash joy to the whole world. No one is left out of this story. Heroes are everywhere. Anyone and everyone is invited to this amazing, joy-filled celebration.



THE POSTURE OF GENEROSITY

Freely we receive, freely we give

Have you experienced the utterly disbelieving joy of God's plan lately?

We need to let go of the need to be serious all the time. We clench our hands and remember our desperate need to get everything right, to be the exact right person. We release all of this to the generous nature of a joy-filled God who invites, who gives, who announces, and who fills.

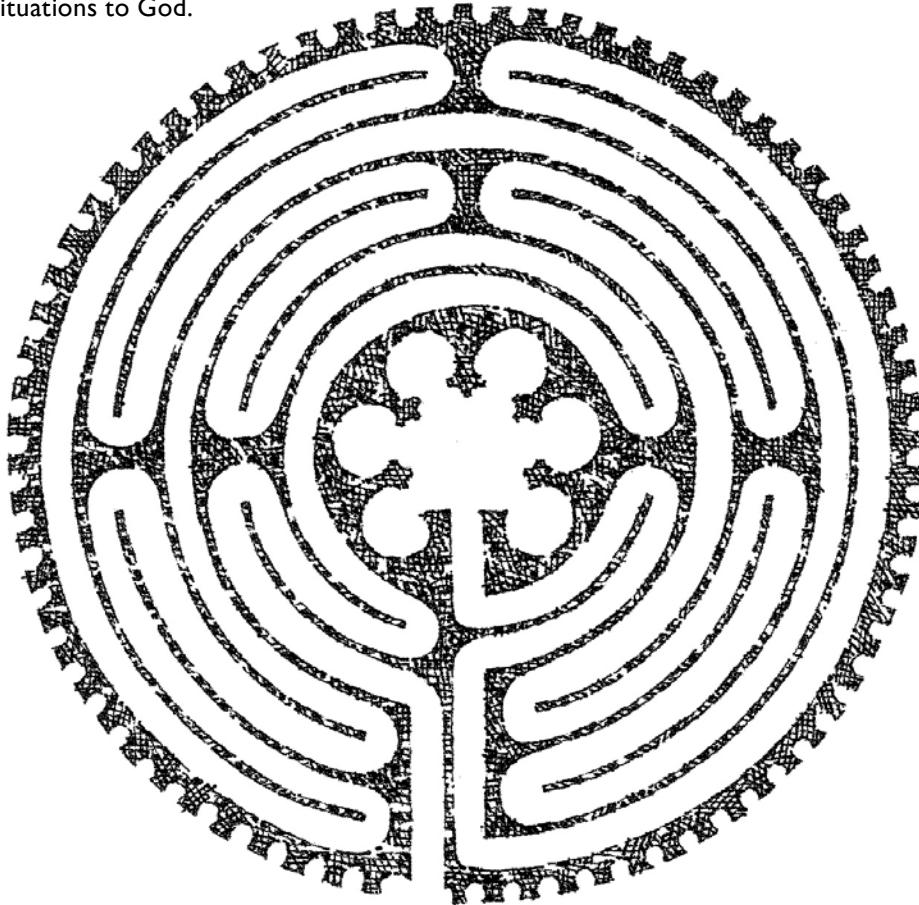
PRAYING A FINGER LABYRINTH

FIRST MOVEMENT: RELEASING (CONFESSION)

Place your finger at the opening of the labyrinth. Pray silently or aloud a prayer of confession. When finished, slowly move your finger along the labyrinth toward the center. Let the words of the prayer stay with you and quiet your mind as you move through the labyrinth. Make room for emotions and stirrings that arise. What needs to be changed, forgiven, cleared, confronted, or healed in your life? Offer these situations to God.

SECOND MOVEMENT: RECEIVING (CENTERING)

When you reach the center, rest your finger there for a moment before you read today's Scripture reading. When you are ready, read the passage slowly, as if you have never read it before. Center on God's Word and be open to what God reveals to you. Return your finger to the center of the labyrinth and reflect on the passage and what it holds for you.



THIRD MOVEMENT: RETURNING (INTERCESSION)

With your finger still on the center where you entered, lift up your intercessory prayers for the day. When you're finished, begin to move your finger back along the same path you followed in. Letting the intercessory prayers stay with you, add to them as you move back out of the labyrinth. Be mindful of

people and circumstances that are in need of your prayers. Hold each one in your heart for a part of your outward journey.

WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED

As you lift your finger from the labyrinth's end, offer thanks to God.



WEEK 2: LIVING OUT GENEROSITY



I choose to hold out my hands as a symbol of generosity. What I have is not mine. I am only a steward of all that You have given me. I want to mirror the way that You opened Your hand to us and lavished Your love and life upon us. I want to live an open-handed life in a closed-fisted culture.

Day 1: Lamentations 3

I choose to open my hands with joy, to receive afresh Your love and mercy, which is new each morning.

Day 2: John 7:25–44

I choose to hold my hands open to the world, seeking to share all that I receive from You.

Day 3: 2 Corinthians 8

I choose to have a generous spirit this season, driven by abundance, not scarcity; hope, not fear.

Day 4: Matthew 25:31–46

I choose to follow Jesus' call to care for our brothers and sisters in need.

Day 5: Galatians 5:13–6:10

I choose to live a lifestyle of generosity, praying for Your wisdom and guidance.

PUT THE POSTURE OF GENEROSITY IN ACTION

BUBBLES? This may seem a little silly but what if you took a few minutes to just blow some bubbles. Yes. Bubbles. And reflect on how those bubbles make you feel. Why do bubbles create joy? What is it that is wonderful about bubbles exactly? How are bubbles connected to comedy and generosity?

Joy is a generous way of living. Joy opens our lives to laughter and fun! Jesus often used joy, like when He turned water into more wine to keep the wedding celebration going in Cana. I'm convinced there was a lot of cheering when Zacchaeus returned all the money he had taken and Jesus declared (with a wide grin) that salvation had indeed come to this man and this party!

While Christmas is full of reasons to celebrate, it can also be difficult season for many.

Think of someone you know who is struggling right now and extend generosity to them.



What ways do you need to open your hands and live more generously? Ask God where He may be inviting you to grow. If it's *time*, write a letter or give the person a call. If it's *financial*, drop off a gift or send an e-gift card. If it's *service*, offer to help on a project.

God has given us abundantly more than we could ever ask or imagine, and we have a lot to give to others this Advent season.

Reflection questions:

1. In this season of giving and receiving, what do you need to receive from God? What do you need to give over to Him?
2. Within your own community, to whom do you feel prompted to give generously as a reflection of Jesus' love?

FAIRYTALE & THE POSTURE OF MISSION



The practice of *Visio Divina*, “divine seeing” in Latin, invites reflection on our life and the Divine through the use of visual art.

Look at the image, let’s wonder together:

What stands out the most to you in this image?

If you could give this art a title, what would it be?

How could we use this image and our words to talk with someone about serving others this Christmas?

FAIRYTALE

Too good to be true

REVELATION 12:11

“They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” —Revelation 12:11 (NIV)

“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.” —G.K. Chesterton

The Scripture I love to read to my three boys on the night before Christmas is not the one from any of the Gospels. It’s not about shepherds or angels or wisemen or kings. It’s about a dragon. And a woman. And a baby.

It’s an epic cosmic picture of the Christmas story. Think about the nativity story but from another galaxy. It’s in Revelation 12, and it’s a little weird and extremely nerve-racking. But it’s an important story.



The picture is of a woman about to give birth and a dragon waiting there for the baby to be born so it can devour it. See what I mean about a little nerve-racking? The dragon hates the woman but hates the child even more. Is there any picture you can think of that is scarier than a woman about to give birth in the midst of the presence of a dragon?! It sounds like a plot in an epic fantasy film. And in a way, it is. It is the all-time epic fantasy—the story that keeps being told a thousand different ways. The story of redemption. The story of overcoming. The story of how the seemingly innocent and helpless victim lives and overthrows the best the enemy throws at her. Against all the odds, the baby lives. Against all the fiery fury of the dragon, the woman is safely delivered and the baby survives and the dragon knows IT'S END IS NEAR.

This is the crazy, ridiculous nature of the Christmas story. It's an epic battle where the good guys really do win. Where the dragon is thwarted, where even the earth opens and participates in the escape route to make sure that life wins, that the baby survives, that the woman is delivered. It's an epic fantasy tale of survival and humanity's ultimate deliverance. It is the gospel.

The good news that dragons exist but can be beaten.

The amazing reality that deliverance will come, and that against all the odds, the little guy can overcome.

I get how stories about Santa and reindeer and magic snowmen can capture the imaginations of children who wish to believe in something bigger and better than the humdrum realities of daily life. But how much more exciting and magical is the reality of what we believe about Jesus? How much more incredible are the exploits of a baby who escapes a dragon only to go on to defeat him when he grows up? The story of Christmas, this nativity account from a cosmic perspective, is straight fairytale. Almost too good to be true, apart from those of us who know this truth—who have experienced that good can come from desperate and weary places, statistics can be broken, poverty can be defeated, and what often looks like the most hopeless place in our world and in our lives is actually the place where deliverance comes.



THE POSTURE OF MISSION

Others-focused living—blessing, hospitality, prayer, zeal, and peace

What part of the world are you despairing?

What part are you tempted to close yourself off to in order to avoid the inevitable destruction that is coming?

Can you dare to believe in the possibility of HOPE and LIFE in that very place?

Can you dare to contribute to the saving power that is possible to help rescue the woman and the baby from the dragon's fiery breath? Maybe the earth that swallows the flood that meant to sweep the woman away is active because of the prayers, actions and attitudes of others? Might you be part of that? The power that says, "We've got you," "You are not alone," "I'm with you"?



KEY ROSARY



Rosaries and prayer beads are an ancient practice. Using the beads to act as prompts for prayer and meditation can be extremely helpful. Many of us carry a rosary unknowingly. It is our set of keys! Take your keys, and use them as an aid to prayer.

Front door key: Who is in your house? Who comes and goes through the door? What ways of Jesus do you want to enter the house? What do you want to stop at the door?

Car key: What journeys have you taken? What places have you visited? Where is the Spirit prompting you to go—whether physically, emotionally, or relationally?

Work keys: Who do you work with? What happens at that place? How can you serve there as unto the Lord?

Other keys:



WEEK 3: LIVING OUT MISSION



I choose to hold my hands forward as a symbol of mission. I want to live for something greater than myself. I want to embrace Your kingdom mission. I want to welcome Your mission to the lost, last, least, and lonely—the poor, powerless, privileged, and persecuted.

Day 1: Luke 4:14–30

I choose to orient my life around the vulnerable and hurting, being an expression of Your love this Christmas season.

Day 2: Ephesians 4:17–32

I choose to reject my self-centered tendencies and choose others-centered actions.

Day 3: Hebrews 11

I choose to engage in this fight, knowing that You can defeat the dragon.

Day 4: 2 Corinthians 4

I choose to welcome discomfort so that I may grow closer to You and others.

Day 5: John 15:1–17

I choose to embrace Jesus' love for me and my neighbors, both near and far.

PUT THE POSTURE OF MISSION IN ACTION

Take a 30-minute prayer walk. Before you go, use a washable marker or piece of chalk to write one word on the sole of each shoe. They can be the same word, or two different words. Choose words that symbolize the hopes and prayers you have for your community. You will literally walk this prayer around your neighborhood. Of course, some of the word will rub off—symbolizing the hope and intention of your prayer—to leave an imprint in this place!

When you return from your walk, write down any reflections, conversations, and inspirations you had.

Reflection questions:

1. What do you consider to be your primary “mission field”? What do you see as a new opportunity for mission in your life?
2. What is one way you could reach your wider community this week, showing God’s love to your neighbors, both near and far?



THANK YOU

Over the last three weeks, you've practiced the prayer postures of surrender, generosity, and mission. We hope that these rhythms from Infinitum will become part of your daily life, and that you continue these practices and join community hubs through the Infinitum app. Take what you've learned during this experience and let it transform your walk with Jesus, now and always.



Download [Infinitum](#) to continue this rhythm of prayer and visit infinitumlife.com to learn more.



World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Motivated by our faith in Jesus Christ, we serve alongside the poor and oppressed as a demonstration of God's unconditional love for all people.



For over 70 years, World Vision has ministered alongside the church to answer Jesus' call in Matthew 25 to care for our brothers and sisters in need.

The church is the greatest God-ordained force for good, and through Jesus we can help heal broken relationships, bear the Good News, and make God's kingdom a visible reality on earth. We partner with church leaders to put the gospel in action by discipling and activating their congregations around God's heart for the poor.

Learn how World Vision is working through our first-ever truly global response to support kids and families made more vulnerable as a result of [the COVID-19 pandemic](#). And please join us in prayer that all the children, families, and communities we serve will experience God's love and enjoy fullness of life.

