

⊕ LIVING COMPASS

# Living Well Through Advent 2022



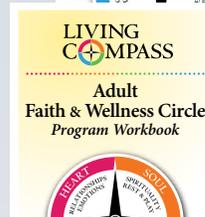
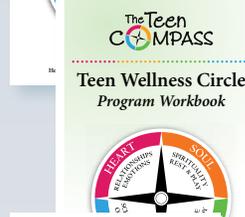
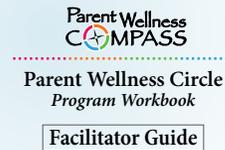
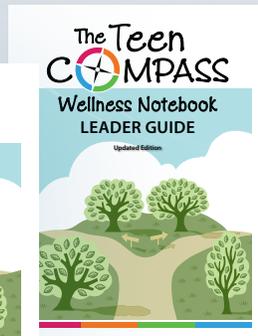
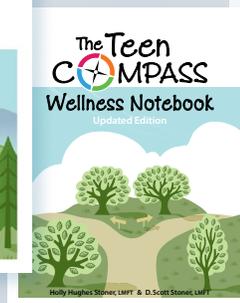
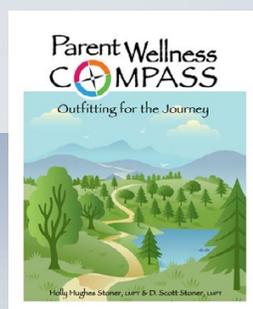
*Practicing Simplicity with All Your  
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

# The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative

In addition to our Advent and Lent devotionals (in English and Spanish), Living Compass offers a number of resources (faith-based and secular) and trainings designed to outfit individuals, families, congregations, and organizations for the journey toward wellness and wholeness. Recognizing that we have a variety of resources that can be used in many creative ways, we offer several ways to learn about, experience, and to become more familiar with them.

We invite you to visit our website: [livingcompass.org](http://livingcompass.org). There you will find more detailed information about our resources, including books, workbooks, facilitator guides for many of our programs, Wellness Circles, Community Wellness Advocate Certificate Trainings, as well as individual training and consultation options. You can also sign up for the Living Compass newsletter, which is the best way to learn about upcoming trainings, highlighted resources, and other opportunities.



To learn more about our resources and our Community Wellness Advocate training, please contact our Program Director Carolyn Karl at [Carolyn@LivingCompass.org](mailto:Carolyn@LivingCompass.org).

# Living Well Through Advent 2022



*Practicing Simplicity with All Your  
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

*The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas.*

*While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and to make this resource possible.*

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## LIVING COMPASS

*Outfitting individuals, families, congregations, and organizations with tools and training for the journey toward wellness and wholeness.*

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  - Find us on the web: [livingcompass.org](https://livingcompass.org)
  - Questions? Email us: [info@livingcompass.org](mailto:info@livingcompass.org)

## About the Writers .....

**Robbin Brent** is the director of publications and resource development for Living Compass, a spiritual director, founder of Wisdom Way of Knowing, and the former director of the Center for Spiritual Resources in NC. Robbin is an experienced leader of spiritual retreats and programs, facilitates global gatherings of contemplative leaders, and is a graduate of Shalem Institute's *Transforming Community* and *Spiritual Guidance* programs. She loves spending time with her two sons, three grandchildren, and dog, Boone, hiking and enjoying early morning coffee while communing with the wildlife that graces her backyard.

**The Rev. Jane Johnson** is an Episcopal priest who serves the Beloved Community of Intercession Episcopal and Redeemer Lutheran (ELCA) Churches in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. She is the lucky wife of Murray, blessed mother of Zach, Meg, Noah, and Abe, and the thrilled grandmother of Annahleah, Greyson, Gus, and Lucille. Jane loves theatre, reading, walking, family, gatherings, sisters, justice, shalom, and always choosing joy.

**The Very Rev. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, ThD** is the Dean and President and Professor of New Testament at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. She is the co-editor of the *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, co-author of the *Wisdom Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, and author of *A Lot of the Way Trees Were Walking: Poems from the Gospel of Mark*. She finds joy in friends, cold-water swimming, and making stuff.

**The Rev. Jan Kwiatkowski** is an Episcopal priest, wellness coach, licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice, and works part time with the Living Compass team. Jan and Dennis have been married for 43 years. Between the families of their four adult sons, they are blessed with nine grandchildren who are the absolute joys of their lives. Adventures with grandchildren, dancing with the Milwaukee Dancing Grannies, knitting, gardening, and sipping oat milk lattes with friends are also sources of life and joy for Jan.



**The Rev. Gary B. Manning** has served as rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, since July 2004. In addition to his day-to-day parish ministry, Gary has worked with several dioceses and a number of individual congregations as a trainer and consultant. In the last few years, he has become a nearly insufferable fan of the English Premier League (Go Saints!), and all things football (aka: soccer). Gary and his spouse, Tabitha, are owned and operated by their two rescue pooches: Finley, the happy-go-lucky terrier, and Clyde, the always-concerned-and-cautious chihuahua/dachshund mix. In addition to taking long walks (and the occasional run), Gary enjoys biking, reading, and bluegrass music.

**The Very Rev. Amy McCreath** serves as the Dean of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in Boston. Her twenty-three-year ministry as an Episcopal priest has focused on mentoring young adults and helping congregations re-root in their communities and discover their next chapter of community life. Amy and the cathedral she serves love Advent so much that they are part of “The Advent Project,” a movement to recover the ancient practice of keeping a seven-week season of Advent. She loves cooking for her family, long phone calls with old friends, and dancing to Talking Heads songs!

**The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner**—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 45 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*, and are co-hosts of the Wellness Compass Podcast. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family, especially with his two grandsons.

# Introduction



Welcome to our journey through Advent and our focus on *Practicing Simplicity with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. In these challenging and complicated times, on the surface it may seem like focusing on simplicity is a luxury, a nice bonus or extra in one's life if one has the space to do so. But in reality, it is critical to our well-being.

We are talking about a practice of simplicity on a much deeper level. This is the kind of simplicity that people talk about when they describe being in the midst of a crisis, and then later report that the crisis has caused them to rethink their priorities, to focus on what is truly most essential in their lives.

In our Living Compass resources we often talk about living from the “inside out.” This is the approach we take in this devotional as we invite readers not simply to rearrange the externals in their lives, but to focus on developing an interior simplicity. This is through and through a spiritual process of going deeper with our faith, which in turn may well create changes to how we order our exterior lives.

The culture puts many demands on us this time of year, wanting us to complicate our lives by doing more, buying more, eating more, etc. Focusing on simplicity, especially a profoundly spiritual interior simplicity, is indeed counter-cultural. This makes it a perfect focus for Advent because the season of Advent itself is counter-cultural. So let us embrace whole-heartedly the season of Advent, along with these reflections, as the support we need to practice simplicity in a way that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

I want to call your attention to the collection of quotes, Bible verses, prayers, and practices that we have included on pages 44–52. We started including these a few years ago, and many people find that these enhance their daily readings. If there is a particular practice that speaks to you, this Advent might be just the right time to try it out.

We are grateful for our four guest writers this Advent: Jane Johnson, Cynthia Kittredge, Gary Manning, and Amy McCreath. We are also blessed by the writing of two of my Living Compass colleagues: Robbin Brent and



Jan Kwiatkowski. Each of these voices will help us reflect on where the Spirit is calling us to practice simplicity in our lives.

It is good to be on this Advent journey together with you.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative

Living Compass—working with The Rev. Pedro and Estela Lopez from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas—has also published *Vivir un buen Adviento en el 2022: Practicando la simplicidad con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*, a Spanish Advent devotional with completely original content. To learn more or to order, visit [livingcompass.org/advent](http://livingcompass.org/advent). Questions? Contact us: [info@livingcompass.org](mailto:info@livingcompass.org).



### The Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Advent 2022

Advent Year A	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
<b>First Sunday of Advent</b> November 27, 2022	Isaiah 2:1-5	Psalm 122	Romans 13:11-14	Matthew 24:36-44
<b>Second Sunday of Advent</b> December 4, 2022	Isaiah 11:1-10	Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19	Romans 15:4-13	Matthew 3:1-12
<b>Third Sunday of Advent</b> December 11, 2022	Isaiah 35:1-10	Psalm 146:5-10 OR Luke 1:46b-55	James 5:7-10	Matthew 11:2-11
<b>Fourth Sunday of Advent</b> December 18, 2022	Isaiah 7:10-16	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	Romans 1:1-7	Matthew 1:18-25

# The Living Compass: ..... A Brief Overview

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.*

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

The Living Compass Model for Well-Being offers us guidance in four dimensions of our being: heart, soul, strength, and mind. Just like a mobile or kinesthetic art, these dimensions are interconnected—movement in one area affects all the others. We are not compartmentalized people. Whatever impacts one area of our lives (positively or negatively) has an impact on the other areas. Each of the four quadrants focuses on two areas of well-being, and each of the eight areas helps to guide and equip us as we commit to being more intentional about the way we live our lives. The purpose of this Compass is to provide a dynamic resource that will assist us in our search for balance and wellness. Our call is to live an undivided life, where heart, soul, strength, and mind are integrated into both our *being* and our *doing*.

## Areas of Wellness

### Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.

### Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to connect with a higher purpose in life and to have a clear set of beliefs, morals, and values that guides our actions.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.



## Strength

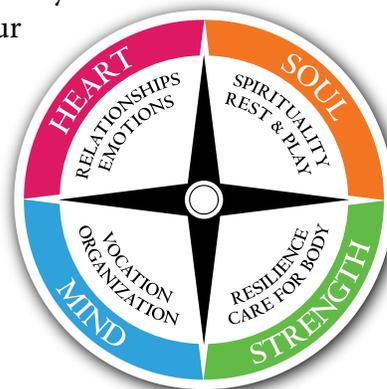
- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.



## Mind

- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life’s purpose with the gifts and talents we’ve been given. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment pursuits.
- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of spirituality and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we intentionally choose the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that “health,” “healing,” “wholeness,” and “holy” all come from the same root word “hal” or “haelen.”



The Living Compass

# Ways to Use *Living Well Through Advent 2022* *A Personal Devotional and an Advent Program*

This devotional is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as we journey through Advent. We begin each Sunday with a reflection written by one of our guest writers. Every Monday we introduce a theme for the week related to *Practicing Simplicity*. The other days of the week begin with Scripture or a quote, followed by a reflection, and then “Making it Personal” questions, which offer an opportunity for you to reflect on the readings as they relate to your own life and spiritual journey. You might want to write down important thoughts, feelings, or insights, so we encourage you to have a journal nearby to use as a companion to this devotional.

*Practicing Simplicity* can also be used by groups. We all benefit from a community of support, and this guide can be used to form or deepen that community. If you would like to use it for a church Advent program (online, or in person if possible), our Facilitator Guide (offered as a free downloadable PDF on our website) provides guidance on how to use this devotional in a small-group setting.

The devotional is perfect as a resource for a half- or full-day Advent retreat (more on this in the Advent Facilitator Guide). Giving each person a copy of this devotional (both printed as well as a free PDF are available on our website) would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Advent.

Another option we now offer for engaging this material is through a daily email that you can sign up to receive. To learn more about this resource, visit our website: [LivingCompass.org/Advent](http://LivingCompass.org/Advent).

This Advent season, however you use this devotional, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.



# *The First Sunday of Advent*

November 27, 2022

## **Waking Up to the Gifts of Simplicity**

by Cynthia Kittredge

*Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep!*

—Romans 13:11

Advent startles us with this rousing charge from St. Paul, “Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep ... !” When we “wake up,” we experience a conversion, a shift from a state of oblivion to alertness, and from unconsciousness to awareness.

If waking up speaks of conversion, what is it we are turning away from when we don't respond to the invitation to practice simplicity? In non-church language simplicity is sometimes called “minimalism.” In the Christian tradition simplicity is translated as poverty, purity, or singleness. Simplicity's opposites include wealth, luxury, excess, complexity, distraction, multiplicity, dissolution. So to wake up to practice simplicity might mean to focus, to reduce, to concentrate, to make single.

I live a rich, wonderful life that I keep track of by lists, lists organized with subheadings and subordinate categories, lists that are stored in paper notebooks and Dropbox and Google Docs. I've bought task management software to search and file and keep it all under control lest I forget a good idea, or let an obligation slip away.

My lists are filled with mostly good things, like friends to stay in touch with, cool projects to tackle, books to read, and ways to improve. But, there are a lot of them, and with every new list, the process gets a bit more complicated. Surfing and scrolling have multiplied the tags and subfolders needed to corral everything. Vague unease becomes obsession, followed by exhaustion, and ending in self-judgment. And then I fantasize that maybe I'll get a word processing program that eliminates distraction, get rid of all my random clothes and replace them with a capsule wardrobe, outfit a van, or hit the Appalachian Trail.

Or in Advent, I could choose to wake up and ask God to remind me to practice what I know about simplicity. I know that when I go on retreat





Monday, November 28, 2022

## Simplicity and Balance

by Scott Stoner

*Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and order  
and rhythm and harmony.*

—Thomas Merton

In Sunday's reflection, Cynthia Kittredge included St. Paul's words, "Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep." St. Paul seems to be warning us that if we are not mindful, we can sleepwalk through this Advent and holiday season, only to find out afterward that we missed experiencing what is most important.

Each week in Advent, we will focus on a theme related to our overall theme of *Practicing Simplicity*. This first week we will focus on "Simplicity and Balance." We start with a focus on living with simplicity and balance because the culture around us will tempt us to do just the opposite over the next four weeks, luring us instead to do more, spend more, and expect more.

We're also starting with simplicity and balance because one sure sign our lives are in balance is that we will experience both mental and emotional steadiness, which is at the heart of the four compass points on the Living Compass: heart, soul, strength, and mind. As we journey through Advent and these daily readings, we will learn that balance is not a static concept, but a dynamic, evolving choosing of what to let go of and what to hold on to in any given moment.

We may be surprised to discover that the balance God desires for us is found not in doing more, but in doing less, an idea that is clearly counter-cultural this time of year. We pray that God will awaken in us a desire to live with greater simplicity, intention, and balance.

**Making It Personal:** What connection do you see between simplicity and balance? As you begin your journey through Advent, are you aware of any choices that you want to make as you prepare for the coming of Christmas, choices that may be different from ones you have made in years past? Do you want to include simplicity and balance in what you are considering? How might today's quote from Thomas Merton inspire you?

Tuesday, November 29, 2022

## Being and Doing

by Scott Stoner

*Be still and know that I am God.*

—Psalm 46:10

Cynthia Kittredge wrote on Sunday about her experience of going on a retreat and how she eliminates many activities when she does so. She described that when she takes this time away, she is choosing to focus on *being* rather than on *doing*. Through a rhythm of prayer and silence, she is better able to focus on being with God.

Retreats are a wonderful way of prioritizing being over doing, and some of us may have the opportunity to go on a retreat during Advent. Whether or not we go on an actual retreat, though, we can each approach this season as an opportunity to focus more on simply being, rather than always doing.

Prayer and silence are two ways to focus on being. So, too, are spending time in nature, going for a walk, getting restful sleep, practicing intentional eating and drinking, and whatever else helps our bodies and souls rest and regain balance.

During one retreat I attended, we prayed the passage above from Psalm 46 in a unique way. We started by praying, “Be still and know that I am God.” We then repeated the prayer slowly, each time dropping off one word: “Be still and know that I am.” “Be still and know.” “Be still.” Our final prayer was simply the one-word prayer, “Be.” If this practice speaks to you, you may want to try it as a way to remind yourself of the importance of balancing doing and being.

**Making It Personal:** Do you struggle with finding a balance between being and doing? What practices or choices might help you find a balance between being and doing during this season of Advent? Did you try the way of praying I described using “Be still and know that I am God”? If yes, what was that like for you?

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Wednesday, November 30, 2022

## Singleness of Heart

by Robbin Brent

*Grant us strength and courage to love and serve you  
with gladness and singleness of heart.*

—Book of Common Prayer, p. 365

In last Sunday's reflection, Cynthia Kittridge wrote that a practice of simplicity might mean "to focus, ... to make single." This brought to mind the excerpt above from a well-known prayer prayed each week in many churches. This short passage offers us a powerful and clear reminder that we need to call on God's strength and courage so that we may live purposefully from our hearts, from love.

"With gladness and singleness of heart" tells us how we are to love and serve. To be glad, to rejoice, requires that we pay attention to what matters most, what makes us grateful. One of the best ways we've found to nurture and strengthen all aspects of our being: heart, soul, strength, and mind, is through a simple practice of gratitude. According to Brené Brown, gratitude is "an emotion that reflects our deep appreciation for what we value, what brings meaning to our lives, and what makes us feel connected to ourselves and others." I would add what also makes us feel more connected to God.

I find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal where I write three things each day for which I am grateful. Others find it helpful simply to note throughout the day the little things for which they are thankful. However we nurture an "attitude of gratitude," we will likely discover that doing so will enhance our ability to live and love "with gladness and singleness of heart."

**Making it Personal:** In what ways do you think intentionally cultivating a practice of gratitude could help you to live with more gladness: in heart, soul, strength, and mind? Does Brené Brown's definition help you to identify those things in life for which you are grateful?

Thursday, December 1, 2022

## FOMO

by Scott Stoner

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything  
by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let  
your requests be made known to God.*

—Philippians 4:6

Whether or not you are familiar with the term FOMO (fear of missing out), you are likely familiar with the uncomfortable feeling it describes. While the experience is not new, the term only entered our vocabulary when the use of social media increased.

Spending too much time on social media can catalyze painful feelings that we are missing out on all the good things and all the good times that others seem to be having. Because people tend to share only the happy highlights of their lives on social media, it is easy to get a misguided idea that we are missing out on so much, which can lead to feelings of FOMO.

Even if we don't spend time on social media, fear of missing out is a common experience during the holiday season. It can be tempting to think that everyone else's families and holiday celebrations are perfect, and that we are the only ones whose lives and families are full of normal human frailties.

Feelings of FOMO may cause us to try to do even more in an attempt to create a seemingly more ideal life—the exact opposite of our focus in this devotional on simplicity. Maintaining a focus on gratitude, as Robbin Brent wrote about yesterday, is the perfect antidote for the feelings of FOMO. When we have such feelings, we are wise to deal with them through prayer and gratitude, as the passage above from Philippians makes clear. The very next verse that follows tells us why: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

**Making It Personal:** Do you struggle with feelings of FOMO? Are you experiencing these feelings right now around the holidays? How might focusing on prayer and gratitude give you more of the “peace which surpasses all understanding”?



Friday, December 2, 2022

## Simplicity and the Breath

by Robbin Brent

*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.*

—Genesis 2:7

God gave us the gift of life by giving us the gift of breath. On average, we take 16 breaths every minute, 960 breaths every hour, and 23,040 breaths every 24 hours. Any time we feel rushed, stressed, overwhelmed, or disconnected, we have hundreds of opportunities every hour to return to our calm, peaceful, grounded center simply by paying attention to our breath. We all have been gifted with this powerful and effective built-in way to slow ourselves down, to rebalance, and to be present, to ourselves, to others, and to God.

In order to work more intentionally with the breath, today we'll explore a breath prayer practice using Psalm 46:10, the verse Scott Stoner invited us to engage with last Wednesday: *Be still and know that I am God*. We can use this awareness prayer practice whenever we need help recentering so that we may listen more deeply for God.

First, simply notice your breathing for a few cycles. Then begin to slow down your breathing, paying attention to any tension you may be holding in your body: the jaw, neck, shoulders, your hands. As you become aware of any tension, simply breathe into those areas while gently relaxing them. After a few slow, relaxing breaths, begin, on the inhale, to say internally: "Be Still." As you exhale, say inwardly: "And Know." Pause briefly at the bottom of your exhale and then repeat the inhale and exhale for as many cycles as you have time for, or until you feel a sense of peace and calm, a sense of inner stability and connection.

**Making It Personal:** Did this breath prayer practice help you to be present and open to God? If you felt any resistance or found yourself distracted, were you able to return to your breath, the silence, and your center? If not, simply notice this without judgment, instead offering kindness, acceptance, and love to yourself.

Saturday, December 3, 2022

## The Gift of Rebalance

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Self-care is a divine responsibility.*

—Anonymous

One January morning, while I was the chaplain at a retirement community, we had four deaths within four hours, two of which were totally unanticipated. In an attempt to tend to both family and staff needs, I was moving as fast as I could between ten floors, trying to be present while balancing it all. In the middle of all that activity, I stopped to grab my prayerbook, respond to my overflowing email and voice mail inboxes, and to dip in briefly to check Facebook. Providentially, the above quote appeared in my feed. God found a way to remind me that even in the whirlwind of pressing, urgent, competing needs, self-care was my responsibility.

One of my favorite Living Compass graphics is that of our mobile (on p. 9). The heart, soul, strength, and mind quadrants are the arms of the mobile with the corresponding eight areas of well-being hanging from each arm. Like any mobile, the pieces respond quickly to any movement, from gently dancing to wobbling wildly because of a gust of wind or busy hands. Yet no matter how wildly they move, if we reach out and bring even one of the pieces to stillness, the rest of the mobile will always slow down and rebalance. And so it is with our lives.

During this season of Advent, the many demands between family, work, church, community, and Christmas preparations can cause our internal mobiles to wobble, obscuring any semblance of balance. Yet, like the hand gently returning the mobile to rest, simple acts of self-care—such as a few deep breaths, walking slowly for a few minutes, or reciting the Lord's Prayer—can serve to return us to internal balance. Anything we can do this season from a more balanced self is one of the best gifts we can offer.

**Making It Personal:** What were your first thoughts about today's quote? Is there a particular area of well-being you feel is too wobbly right now? If yes, what is one simple practice you might use to recenter yourself throughout the day?

# *The Second Sunday of Advent*

December 4, 2022

## **Santiago and Simplicity**

by Gary Manning

*Being content with less, creates space in the heart for more love.*

—Margo Vader, *Take A Little Soul Time*

When I was preparing to walk the Camino de Santiago, I spent a fair amount of time on various online forums attempting to learn as much as possible about the practicalities of day-to-day life on “The Way.” Of particular importance to me was figuring out what “essentials” I should take with me in my backpack. The general rule of thumb for pilgrims is that the weight of the backpack and its contents should not exceed 10% of one’s body weight (in my case, this was around 15 pounds).

Over the course of the weeks leading up to my walk, I packed, unpacked, and repacked my gear at least a dozen times. With each round of packing and unpacking, I would make tortured decisions about which items to include and which ones to leave behind. I remember reading advice from one experienced pilgrim who contended that the fundamental lesson of the Camino was learning to “let go of the fantasy one could fortify oneself against every possible circumstance.” This pilgrim went on to say, “Simplifying what you carry will not only be easier on your knees and shoulders, but also on your mind—because you’ll spend less time worrying about keeping track of things you’ll likely never use anyway.”

By the time I took my first steps toward Santiago, I had managed to get the weight of my pack down to 16.4 pounds! And guess what? Some of the things I had identified as “absolutely essential” were never needed, even though I carried them for 480 miles across Spain.

When Matthew tells us about John the Baptist in today’s Gospel reading, he makes special note of John’s minimalist wardrobe and limited dietary requirements. The message of repentance John proclaimed was of such hefty urgency, he couldn’t be burdened with extra stuff. He was a man on the move. Whatever else John might need for his ministry would have to





Monday, December 5, 2022

## Simplicity and Letting Go

by Scott Stoner

*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.  
See, I am doing a new thing! ... I am making a way  
in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

—Isaiah 43:18-19 (NIV)

In yesterday's reflection, Gary Manning wrote about how his experience walking Spain's Camino de Santiago required him to practice letting go by significantly limiting what he chose to carry on his journey. As we continue our journey through Advent and our focus on simplicity, we discover that our spiritual journey requires that we, too, let go of certain things.

The connection between practicing simplicity and letting go is our theme for this second week of Advent. Each day this week, we will focus on a different aspect of letting go and its relationship to simplicity.

Near the end of his reflection, Gary shared a powerful list of emotions that we would do well to let go of, including guilt, shame, anger, fear, cynicism, and hatred. It would be daunting if we had to depend solely on our own power and efforts in order to let go of these things. But as our friends from 12-Step groups remind us, the key to letting go is to "let go and let God." When we turn to God for help, we find the spiritual strength we need to face our fears as we work to let go and to embrace simplicity and a new way of living.

This week we will discover that letting go of what no longer serves allows us to walk more simply and freely, whether we are walking the journey of the Camino or the journey of Advent.

**Making It Personal:** As we begin this week's focus on simplicity and letting go, what does this theme bring to mind for you? Do you see a spiritual connection between simplicity and letting go? In the list of emotions Gary mentioned that can weigh us down, is there one specific thing you would like to let go of this Advent?

Tuesday, December 6, 2022

## Letting Go of Worry

by Scott Stoner

*Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; ... If God so clothes the grass of the field, ... will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?*

—Matthew 6:27-30

It is worth noting that the word *worry* is derived from the 14th-century German word for strangle. Closely related to worry is *anxiety*, which comes from the root word that means *to constrict*. Worry constricts, perhaps even strangles, our ability to practice simplicity. And worry definitely robs us of living fully in the present moment.

Jesus is making the same point when he asks if any of us can add a single hour to our lifespan by worrying. Research shows just the opposite; the stress from chronic worry and anxiety can shorten our lives.

It is best to start with small, simple steps to loosen the hold that worry can have on us. Here is one idea of how to proceed. Name one specific concern you would like to let go of right now. As often as possible, speak this desire to yourself while visualizing what life will look like once you let go of this particular worry. Some people find it helpful to write down their worries as a way to release them. Try giving your worry to God in prayer. If you find yourself taking the concern back, that's okay; just let go and give it to God again—as many times as you need. Acting our way into a new way of feeling is sometimes the best way to create a change we desire. And finally, notice if, over time, you experience a little more peace and simplicity as you let go of your specific worry.

**Making It Personal:** Were you able to name a specific worry that you want to release? Did speaking, visualizing, and/or writing about letting go of this worry ease its burden? Do you see a connection between simplicity and letting go of this worry?

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Wednesday, December 7, 2022

## Freedom in Letting Go

by Robbin Brent

*John the Baptist's minimalism was an act of faith.*

—Gary Manning

It's easy to choose between something we love and want and something we don't. But it is much more difficult to choose between things we think we both want and need. In Sunday's reflection, Gary Manning described this tension when he wrote about the challenge he faced when he had to choose to let go of things he thought were essential for the journey. Yet he discovered along the way that even some of the things he chose to carry that he thought he couldn't travel without simply weren't essential to the trip.

What are some of the things we are lugging around even though we don't need them? This time of year we are cleverly tempted by our culture to jump on the mad merry-go-round of buying more, owning more, eating more, drinking more, wanting more. Sadly, the very things we're promised will get us more of everything we want end up causing us to feel weighed down and unhappy.

Instead, like John the Baptist, if we can ground ourselves in our faith and heed its guidance toward more simplicity through letting go, we can prevent our stuff from getting in between us and the love of God, which is what we ultimately long for. And from that spaciousness we will be free to be more fully present to the gifts of this holy season.

**Making it Personal:** What is your response to the connection Gary made when he wrote that John the Baptist's minimalism was an act of faith? Do you have a desire to lighten your load and free yourself from past choices that no longer serve your life? If yes, is there one thing you are ready to let go of this Advent?

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Thursday, December 8, 2022

## Grief and Simplicity

by Scott Stoner

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Grief is a common emotion during the holiday season. It is natural to reminisce about past celebrations and to miss loved ones who are no longer with us. Perhaps this is the first Christmas since a loved one has died, moved away, or there has been a separation of a different type that means you will not be together this year.

If we are not mindful, a common response when we are grieving is to try to hold on to the past, sometimes to the point of denying that this holiday season will be different. We may even go so far as to pretend to not feel the sorrow or pain. Difficulty letting go of past ways of celebrating the holidays can be an indication of unresolved grief.

If things are different for us this year, or have been for a while, we can embrace our new reality by choosing to simplify how we will celebrate. The hard work of accepting that we no longer can do what we used to do can open up new possibilities, maybe for a simpler, perhaps more spiritual, focus on Advent and Christmas.

**Making It Personal:** Are you experiencing grief or loss this holiday season? How can you both honor your grief and be open to new possibilities that might be present for you this year? In honoring that grief, is there any way you wish to simplify how you celebrate Advent and Christmas?

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Friday, December 9, 2022

## A Spoon and a Prayer

by Robbin Brent

*Practice makes progress, not perfection.*

—Unknown

Perfectionism is something I've wrestled with most of my life. During a workshop years ago, one of my favorite teachers of growth and change, Tom Condon, prescribed a practice for those of us who struggled with the need to do things perfectly. He suggested that we purposefully drop a spoon on the floor in a restaurant. He explained that we do this in order to learn that not only will we not die from a lethal dose of mortification, we may learn, as we practice being "imperfect," to loosen the grip perfectionism has on us so that we may experience more ease as we move through our lives. We may come to feel a sense of "enoughness" as we let go of the belief that we need to be perfect in order to belong.

After I finally worked up enough courage to drop a spoon on the floor of a restaurant, not much happened, on the outside. The sky didn't fall. The only person who noticed was the waiter, who promptly replaced my utensil. That's it. But on the inside, I experienced a significant shift. Through this simple little act, I realized that what I'd been telling myself about what would happen if I wasn't perfect simply wasn't true.

What is true is that when we aren't driven by a need to be perfect, we are much more relaxed, open, and trusting. Perhaps when we can let go of perfectionism, we will be freer to accept, enjoy, and connect with our imperfect selves while trusting that despite—or because of—our imperfections, we know we are a beloved and cherished child of the Holy One.

**Making it Personal:** Can you relate to the struggle with a need to be perfect? This can be especially true this time of year. Can you think of one simple practice or prayer you could incorporate into your day that would help you to be more accepting, patient, and kind, toward yourself, and toward others?

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Saturday, December 10, 2022

## The Stable's Invitation

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped  
him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger;  
because there was no room for them in the inn.*

—Luke 2:7 (KJV)

The holiday season is filled to the brim with cultural and personal ideals of what a good Christmas needs to include, like the perfect tree, unique decorations, unsurpassed presents, delicious food, and harmonious family gatherings. No wonder we can feel so stressed this time of year.

The messiness and humility of the stable stands in stark contrast to our definitions of what makes a “perfect” Christmas. Mary and Joseph loved their unborn child with every fiber of their being and they did all they could so that Jesus could be born in the best possible place in the best possible conditions. Yet they were forced by circumstances beyond their control to let go of their hopes of finding the perfect place in which to welcome their baby, and instead had to settle for a stable.

Despite this setback, they were somehow able to let go and trust that God was present and would provide what was needed. The stark simplicity of the stable became a holy place of letting go.

We all have expectations about Christmas. Yet, like Mary and Joseph, we may find ourselves in a situation where circumstances beyond our control force us to let go of our hopes and dreams, our best-laid plans.

The stable invites us to remember the gift of God’s love being birthed in us whenever we are able to let go of expectations and instead choose to trust. God’s love is always present no matter what life brings.

**Making It Personal:** Are you facing a situation or circumstance beyond your control right now? What helps you to let go of an outcome and instead trust in God’s loving presence? How might you experience God’s love being birthed anew in you?

# *The Third Sunday of Advent*

December 11, 2022

## **Being Present to Joy**

by Amy McCreath

*Oh I do wish you joy*

*And I wish you happiness*

—Dolly Parton, *I Will Always Love You*

“Let’s go!”

Twice a year, my colleague Paul would show up in the doorway of my office at 9 a.m. and issue this directive. I would drop whatever I was working on, and walk with him to the office of our colleague Johanna, and together we would stand in her doorway and exclaim, “Let’s go!”

The three of us would leave behind whatever we thought we were going to do that day, climb into Paul’s enormous Buick, and drive up to the coast, listening to Dolly Parton songs all the way. We would eat lobster rolls for lunch, which Paul always insisted on paying for, and stop at a famous fudge store on the way back.

Paul’s “Let’s go!” always came in the middle of months that felt overwhelming. They interrupted me when I was struggling to trust that I could truly be the vessel of love and justice that God was calling me to be. They came when my hands were weak and my knees feeble. They came when everything felt too complicated and my skills inadequate.

Paul’s “Let’s go!” was a simple invitation, and the day away was a simple activity. It was a spiritual practice, really: Step away. Be present to the possibility of joy today. Simple. But a powerful practice.

The third Sunday of Advent arrives like a hearty, “Let’s go!” offered by a generous companion. Three weeks into a season of watching and waiting in hope for the coming Light, Love, and Truth that is the incarnation of God in Jesus, we are weary. If we are living in northern climes, the days are growing shorter and chillier, and our calendars are overcrowded with responsibilities as the holidays draw near. On this third Sunday of Advent, the church invites us to rejoice—*gaudete* in Latin—and refreshes

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

our hearts and eyes by adorning itself in the color rose. Refreshed for the journey still ahead to Christmas, we can rejoice now because we know that God is faithful to God’s promises. Jesus is coming soon.

Mary, the mother of our Savior, is the voice of Gaudete Sunday, the one standing in the doorway saying, “Let’s go!” Her spirit is rejoicing, because she knows in her very body that God is fulfilling all those promises announced by Isaiah so long ago. God is showing mercy, casting down the mighty, and lifting up the lowly. And God is doing that within her and for her and within us and for us, now and always.

So sing along with Dolly Parton today, or sing the Magnificat, or just let out a big “Hurrah!” For God is good and present and doing more than we can imagine.

Lined writing area consisting of 20 horizontal lines.



Monday, December 12, 2022

## Simplicity and Joy

by Scott Stoner

*Joy is not just about being happy. Joy is a rigorous spiritual practice of saying yes to life on life's terms.*

—Mark Matousek

Have you ever thought about the difference between happiness and joy? The Dalai Lama and the late Desmond Tutu provide a helpful distinction in a book they wrote together a few years ago entitled, *The Book of Joy*. They observe that happiness tends to be based on circumstances and is fleeting, like a butterfly that comes and goes. This focus on circumstances is revealed when we hear ourselves say something like, “I will be happy when such and such happens.” This indicates that our happiness depends on something outside of ourselves.

Joy is internal and more constant. Joy is less dependent on external circumstances. Desmond Tutu faced enormous suffering in his lifetime (as has the Dalai Lama), yet Tutu was one of the most joyful people I have ever had the good fortune to meet. Even though our meeting was several years ago, I still remember his infectious smile and laugh. His joy came from a place deep within, from a lifetime of cultivation.

Cultivating a spirit of joy takes regular practice, much like cultivating simplicity. This week, we will focus on the more profound experiences of simplicity and joy that are less affected by the inevitable ebbs and flows of external events. This is similar to the “peace that passes understanding” and “an attitude of gratitude” referenced in earlier reflections. These interior mindsets of simplicity, joy, peace, and gratitude are the foundations of living a spiritual life, and I know that, for me, they require a lifelong commitment to nurturing and strengthening.

**Making It Personal:** Do you think of happiness and joy as being different? If so how, or why not? What initial thoughts do you have about the connection between simplicity and joy? Do you see a connection between these two in your life right now?

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Tuesday, December 13, 2022

## Saying Yes!

by Scott Stoner

*Be present to the possibility of joy. ... For God is good  
and present and doing more than we can imagine.*

—Amy McCreath

In the story from Sunday’s reflection, when Amy McCreath’s friend Paul came and said, “Let’s go!” she had several choices of how she could have responded. She could have said, “No, can’t you see how busy I am?” Or, “This is just not the right time for this.” She also could have responded with, “Yes, but I can only be gone for an hour.” Or, “Yes, but I can’t leave until I get more work done.” Instead, she chose, “Yes, let’s go!” and off Amy and her two friends went for a day of simple laughter and joy.

Amy’s story speaks to me of the stress I frequently put on myself this time of year as I get so busy making plans of all sorts. I find myself thinking that once all my plans work out, I will then be able to stop and enjoy myself. It is often, however, at just that moment that God comes along and invites me to let go of my plans and choose instead to experience joy in *this* present moment. Occasionally I am able to say “Yes!” and when I do, I am always grateful. Too often, though, I say, “Not now,” or “Yes, but ...”

Planning can be essential during the holidays. But, we all know the saying, “Too much of a good thing ...” To paraphrase the scripture from Ecclesiastes 3, there is a time to plan, and a time (yes even during Advent) to spontaneously let go of those plans, and to say “Yes!” to God’s invitation to cultivate both simplicity and joy right here and now in the present moment.

**Making It Personal:** What might God be inviting you to spontaneously say “Yes” to right now? Are you aware of times when you are seemingly saying “Yes” to God, but often making it a “Yes, but ...”? Are the holidays this year offering you a chance to say “Yes” to a different plan than perhaps you originally had in mind?

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Wednesday, December 14, 2022

## Making a Joyful Noise

by Robbin Brent

*I believe in kindness. Also in mischief. Also in singing,  
especially when singing is not necessarily prescribed.*

—Mary Oliver

This past year I discovered why joy and singing are celebrated throughout the Bible. For more than 20 years, I had wanted to take singing lessons but because I had no desire to sing publicly, I didn't think a voice coach would want to work with me. I simply wanted to explore, honor, and celebrate my true voice. Then, through a mutual friend, I discovered a marvelous and gifted voice coach who was happy to work with me.

After only a few sessions, I was amazed at how singing every day brought so much joy and delight, not only to singing, but to other areas of my life and relationships, as well. This reminds me of one of the foundational principles running through all of the Living Compass resources: all areas of our well-being are interconnected. What happens in one area of our lives will affect all the other areas. My experience confirms the wisdom and truth of this, and it offers hope and encouragement because it means we don't have to tackle every area we feel needs our time and attention. If we give our full attention and prayer to just one area, the growth and transformation we experience there will offer unexpected blessings to the whole of our being.

While I don't have room to share the 500+ Bible verses related to joy and singing I found, here is one that has lifted my spirits along the way from Psalm 13:5-6: *Let my heart rejoice in your saving help. Let me sing to the Lord.*

**Making it Personal:** What is your response to the idea that all areas of whole-person well-being are interconnected? Is there an activity or hobby you've wanted to try but for some reason haven't yet? Something that makes you happy just to think about? If yes, what is one step you could take today that would move you closer to your desire?

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Thursday, December 15, 2023

## True Simplicity and Joy

by Scott Stoner

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy  
and peace as you trust in him. ...*

—Romans 15:13 (NIV)

In his quote, “Comparison is the thief of joy,” Theodore Roosevelt reminds us that comparison has the capacity to steal our joy. I think it also has the power to do the same with simplicity.

Our consumer culture thrives on comparison, and the holidays often pile on an additional layer of struggles with comparison. Its subtle goal is to make us feel in some way inadequate if we don’t have the newest version of this or that product/relationship/job. Social media also encourages comparison as people post only the highlight reels of their lives. If we are not careful, we can find ourselves wondering why our imperfect lives don’t look as flawless as other lives. We may wonder why everyone else’s images of their family seem perfect, while the painful, often messy, challenges within our families are so well-known to us.

When comparison leads to feelings of inadequacy, it can prompt us to do, buy, eat, or drink more to overcome these uneasy feelings. We are wise to remember that doing or buying more is the opposite of simplicity, and that true joy and simplicity are found not in doing or getting more, but often in being content with less.

No comparison is necessary when we focus on true simplicity and joy. A quiet moment alone, with a friend or loved one, in nature, or with God, can be an abundant gift of simplicity and joy in and of itself. There is no need to compare it to any other moment—either our own or someone else’s. Giving ourselves permission to take the time we need to create rich moments for ourselves is the best protection we can offer our joy.

**Making It Personal:** What do you think of the idea that comparison can be a thief of both joy and simplicity? Are you caught up in any kind of comparing your life to others during this holiday season? If so, what choices can you make to reclaim a greater sense of true simplicity and joy?



Friday, December 16, 2022

## Simple Joy

by Robbin Brent

*It is a valuable practice at night to spend a little while revisiting sanctuaries of your lived day. Each day is a secret story woven around the radiant heart of wonder. We let our days fall away like empty shells and miss all the treasures.*

—John O’Donohue

As we continue to explore simplicity and joy, the quote above captures the importance of the simple yet essential practice of noticing each day what brings us wonder and joy. So how do we pay attention to what brings us joy? And when we figure that out, how do we sustain and grow the experience of joy?

I’ve found three spiritual practices in particular that keep me grounded and receptive to what brings me joy: gratitude, meditation, and a daily examen (see p. 51 for the Daily Examen prayer practice). For many of us, practicing gratitude wherever possible helps us to notice what brings us joy. Quietening the mind through silence creates space to listen more closely for what brings joy. And a daily examen provides an opportunity to look thoroughly and honestly at the day, identifying the highs and lows, the joyful and the painful.

What I’ve discovered is that it is the small things that bring me the most enduring joy: the smell of my grandbaby, the first birdsong of the morning, the sun’s reflection sparkling on the waves, the taste of freshly picked strawberries, the warmth of a hug from a friend.

When we are able to celebrate what brings us joy, we celebrate what truly matters: a sense of belonging, of loving and being loved, of experiencing and expressing joy, which is a perfect gift to offer, to ourselves and to others during this holy season of Advent.

**Making it Personal:** What helps you to identify and celebrate the simple joys in your life? Perhaps you might pause right now and name something small that has brought you joy recently. What might help you to continue to notice the small things that bring you joy for the remainder of Advent?

Saturday, December 17, 2022

## Birthday Joy

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

—Psalm 118:24

One of my grandsons turned 4 this year. I've never seen a kid who loves the traditional birthday rituals more than this kid. He had me text his parents to tell them that everyone needed to shout "surprise!" when he walked in the door, even though the party wasn't due to start for another three hours. Following the customary lighting of the candles, singing, and the blowing out of the candles, he curled his fists against his beaming face and his little body shook with joy. As if turning 4, having cake, candles, presents, and the love of his family was almost too much to take in.

Young children have so much to teach us about living joyfully in the moment. While the verse above from Psalm 118 is generally associated with Easter, it's also appropriate for living in the joyful expectation of Advent. Living Compass encourages us to "pay attention to what we pay attention to." No matter the day, the time, or the season, we are offered the opportunity to pay attention to the things that bring us down or bring us joy. What we pay attention to affects the quality of our work, play, relationships, health, mood, everything.

As we wait in expectation for the fullness of God's Love, just as did our ancestors who waited for the Messiah, let us pay attention to the joy we feel as we honor the One whose birthday we are preparing to celebrate. In the midst of whatever this Advent brings, may we look for and anticipate simple moments of joy each day.

**Making It Personal:** Recall a time a child taught you a lesson about joy. How might you apply that lesson to your life today? Notice what you pay attention to and how it affects the quality of your day.

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# *The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

December 18, 2022

## **Love Is Waiting to Be Born**

by Jane Johnson

*We are all meant to be mothers of God.  
God is always needing to be born.*

—Meister Eckhart

When I was pregnant with my first child, the popular thing for expectant parents to do was to take Lamaze classes. At these classes we learned how to keep things as simple as possible in order to breathe, to focus, and to prepare ourselves for the tremendously difficult work of labor. Back in those days (the mid-eighties), “better living through chemistry” wasn’t encouraged during childbirth, so we were counting on our preparation and our breathing to see us through. And we were told to prepare some items to have with us, including a “focus item.” The focus item was something we would look at to help us focus all our energy and strength into the work our minds and hearts and bodies would be doing in order to give birth.

In week four of Advent we hear the story of how Joseph learns he is going to, very unexpectedly, become a father. Many of us, like Joseph, get thrown an unexpected curveball and we have to quickly adjust. And it’s such a good news/bad news situation for him: “Mary’s pregnant! Hooray! But wait, how can that be? What will people think? Of me? Of her? Of this child? Culture tells me to walk away. But this angel, this messenger, tells me that this child is of the Holy Spirit and to name him Jesus, Yeshua—the One who saves. AND ... this new life is entrusted to me.”

What an overwhelming prospect! I often wonder if Joseph consulted anyone else. Did Joseph have some trusted advisors who helped him to figure out what to do? I mean, that’s what I do when I get overwhelming information or a request is made of me that seems too big to even really consider. I go to my trusted circle of people, and they help me wade through the details, the fears, and the excitement, so that I can get at the heart of the matter.





Monday, December 19, 2022

## Simplicity and Faith

by Scott Stoner

*And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us.*

—Ephesians 5:2 (NKJV)

There are countless books and blogs on simplicity and minimalism, most written from a secular point of view. Many of them are quite helpful, and we can learn much from them. As people of faith, though, it is also essential to ground our approach to simplicity in our relationship with God. Connecting simplicity with faith will be our specific theme for this final week of Advent.

Yesterday Jane Johnson wrote, “God is with us; Love resides here.” She offers it to us as a “focus item” for Advent. I agree, and I also think it is helpful for us to ground a Christian understanding of simplicity with these same words: “God is with us; Love resides here.”

I connect these words with simplicity because if God is already with us and always with us, and if Love already and always resides here, then I simply need to awaken and live more fully into that reality. I don’t have to wait for it to happen, and I don’t have to go find it or “make” it happen because it is already here and already happening.

Jesus’ invitation to walk in love is quite simple. If and when it seems more complicated, it is because I have made it so. As we will rediscover and celebrate again this week, “God is with us; Love resides here” is a simple gift that we have already been given, and a gift we are continually offered again and again.

**Making It Personal:** What initial thoughts do you have about the connection between simplicity and faith? Can you think of a phrase or a portion of Scripture that could serve as a “focus item” for you this week as you think about a Christian approach to simplicity?

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Tuesday, December 20, 2022

## The Gift of Simplicity

by Scott Stoner

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,*

—Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*

The Shakers were a Christian sect known for their simple ways of living, as captured in the familiar song *Simple Gifts*, written in 1848 by Shaker elder Joseph Brackett. There are eight lines to this song (the entire song is on p. 44), and over the next several days, we will reflect on them, two lines at a time.

The opening lines of *Simple Gifts* appear above. Together we will unpack the wisdom they contain for us as we continue reflecting upon the connection between simplicity and our faith.

First, and most importantly, these first two lines of the song mention the word “gift” three times. If simplicity is a gift then it implies that there must be a giver. The giver, although not explicitly stated in this song, is clearly God. We are called to be stewards of this gift, in the same way a gardener stewards the conditions for a plant. We are to help it grow, knowing with time and attention God will create the growth. We each are called to be stewards of simplicity in the garden of our own souls.

Staying with the gardening image, the phrases “’tis a gift to be free” and “to come down where we ought to be” both speak of the fruit that manifests in our lives when we are being mindful stewards of God’s gift of simplicity. Of course, just as with any garden, our lives are a work in progress, and there will always be plenty of weeds and distractions that need tending. We do the tending, and God creates the growth.

**Making It Personal:** What words or phrases speak to you in the first two lines of *Simple Gifts*? What do you think of the idea that simplicity is a gift we are given and that our role is to be “stewards of simplicity”?

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Wednesday, December 21, 2022

## Faith as Our Compass

by Robbin Brent

*And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.*

—Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*

Faith and simplicity, our focus for this week, are both powerful resources for the journey to the valley of love and delight. Prominent Quaker Rufus Jones wrote, “Faith is an inward attitude based on first-hand experience. It is an active powerful thing, a deliberate confidence in the grace of God which makes a man joyous and intrepid.”

As we grow our confidence in the grace of God, at first we may have more questions than answers. How do we partner with God in order to journey to the “valley of love and delight”? How do we cultivate a practice of love and delight, which is how we will know we are in the place just right? Rufus gives us a hint: faith. The faith he describes makes us unafraid, and allows us to believe before we can see exactly where we are headed.

“Find ourselves,” from the line above, suggests we don’t get there on our own. I imagine God’s guiding us to the “place just right” to be like the delightful surprise we want to share with someone we love. We might cover their eyes and lead them joyfully to the surprise, and then tell them they can open their eyes. And we hope that our gift will fill them with delight and love. This could be what God is up to in our lives: gently inviting us toward that which will fill us with love and delight. Even though we may not be able to see where we’re going, we can trust that God is leading us every step of the way.

When we open our eyes, may we be filled with love and delight at the place just right that God has so lovingly prepared for us.

**Making it Personal:** Reflect on your own relationship with faith. What if anything has shifted for you recently? Have you noticed any distractions or resistance getting in the way of receiving these gifts? In what ways has the focus this Advent supported you in experiencing the gifts of simplicity?

Thursday, December 22, 2022

## Bowing and Bending

by Scott Stoner

*When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed.*

—Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*

These next lines from *Simple Gifts* remind us that one manifestation of simplicity is: “to bow and bend we will not be ashamed.”

In the Christian tradition, as in other religious faiths, bowing is a sign of reverence, respect, and love. One recent manifestation of this came to light during the pandemic within the worship services of many churches. In churches that exchange a sign of the “Peace of Christ” with one another, people would share the peace by bowing to one another rather than by shaking hands as they usually would.

When I think of bending, I think of being flexible. When I am grounded in the simplicity of God’s love, I know that I am much more flexible, willing, and open to listen to others, reconsider my position, and even change if needed. In fact, one of the ways I know I am not grounded in God’s love is that I become rigid and inflexible. In such a state, I can rarely bow or bend to others, or even to God.

I also want to call attention to the final words of this section from *Simple Gifts*, the words “will not be ashamed.” The essential point of these words is that as an expression of my faith, I bow and bend in a spirit of love, reverence, and respect, not from a place of shame or guilt. When I am grounded in God’s love, I want to, and freely choose to, offer the gift of bowing and bending to others.

**Making It Personal:** Plans don’t often go as expected during the holidays, so how might you have the opportunity to bend and be flexible right now? What difference do you see in offering the gift of bowing and bending because you choose to, rather than from a place of feeling like you have to?

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Friday December 23, 2022

## Sacred Dance of Faith

by Robbin Brent

*To turn, turn will be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

—Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*

The Shakers believed that dancing brought them closer to God. This song was written for dancing as a celebration of their faith and love of God through joyful movement in community.

In dancing, we often have a partner. I imagine God being our partner for this sacred dance of life. When I can trust and let go and follow, I always feel I'm in the right place in the life God has invited me to live. So, how can we know? "Turning with delight" describes the movement we'll experience along the way, and how we will know that we are headed toward our own true north, the place where our desires join God's desires for us.

When I'm trying to discern what next step (turning) I need to take in any situation, my wise spiritual Guide encourages me to simply ask, "Does this draw me toward God, or away from God?" I could also add, "Toward balance or away from balance? Toward simplicity or away from simplicity? Toward letting go of what gets in the way of my love of God, or away? Toward joy or away from joy? Toward a deeper faith or away from my faith?"

One of the ways I know that my desires and God's desires for me are in alignment is the sense of peace and calm that I feel, an ease I experience in my body. If this resonates with you, perhaps you might pay attention this coming week to how you are feeling in your body when you are choosing what to do next in your day. Do you feel a sense of calm? Of ease, of a just-rightness? Or do you feel off balance, uncomfortable, out of sorts? Pay attention and allow your body to help guide you, one right choice at a time, toward a life of greater simplicity, more balance, more joy, more calm, more ease.

**Making it Personal:** How do you know you are "coming 'round right"? How might you intentionally call on your faith and the wisdom of your body to help guide your next steps?

Saturday December 24, 2022

## Holy Simplicity

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child!  
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,  
—Joseph Mohr, Silent Night*

I was a church musician for seventeen years. For several of those years, the choir director and I worked simultaneously at two churches. On Sundays Bill would leave after communion at church A, drive to church B, while I directed the choir anthem, played the final hymn, and then headed to church B. Bill started the service at church B, and I arrived by the first reading, just in time to play the rest of the service. During Christmas and Easter, this arrangement got complicated. One very snowy Christmas Eve, our trips to church B were slower than either of us planned on. We almost hit each other at an intersection. True story.

Bill contacted the priest to let him know we would not be there in time to start the service. The priest had musical ability and was able to lead hymns without instrumental accompaniment. By the time we arrived at church B, hand-held candles illuminated the church and it was time to sing *Silent Night*. Following the quiet instrumental introduction voices began to sing. Time seemed to stop.

This familiar hymn, recalling images of tenderness, love, pure light, and peace, reminded Bill and me that our earnest Christmas preparations were small compared to the profoundly simple gift of God's perfect love.

**Making It Personal:** Which lyrics of *Silent Night* speak to you at this moment? How has your understanding of simplicity evolved since the first Sunday of Advent? If things don't go as planned for you today or tomorrow, how might you remain open to the unexpected ways in which God can still show up?

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# Christmas Day

December 25, 2022

## Receiving the Gift

by Robbin, Jan, and Scott

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.*

—Phillips Brooks, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

This past week we have been reflecting on the wisdom found in the song *Simple Gifts*. And today, we celebrate the most precious gift of all, the gift of God becoming incarnate in the birth of Jesus.

May we discover a deep desire in heart, soul, strength, and mind to make room in the inn of our lives to receive the gift of God's love made manifest in Jesus, a gift beyond measure. May we seek balance by having the courage to live a simpler, less distracted life. May we seek God's blessing and guidance so that what we choose to let go of and what we choose to hold onto reflects and honors the life God has invited us to fully and freely live. May we know joy in the depths of our being and a peace that overflows the banks of our minds and hearts. And may we lean on and into our faith more intentionally, trusting it will lead us toward a life of sacred, authentic simplicity and love. May we come to know and trust that when we delight in God's gifts, we delight God.

And now, having once again received the gift of Jesus' very presence in our lives, completely and with no reservations, may we share it generously with others.

It has been an honor and a gift for us to walk this journey through Advent to Christmas with you.

We wish you a holy Christmas filled with simplicity, balance, peace, joy, and love.

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# Quotes, Scripture, Prayers & Practices for Advent

## Quotes

*When we get the size of our expectations right, we do simple things well.*

—Donna Schaper, *Living Well While Doing Good*

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*Simplicity is not about deprivation. Simplicity is about a greater appreciation for things that really matter.*

—Anonymous

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*Less really is more. Only those who have nothing to prove and nothing to protect, those who have in them a broad space big enough to embrace every part of their part of their own soul, can receive the Christ. And Christ himself will lead us on this path.*

—Richard Rohr, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*

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*Being content with less, creates space in the heart for more love.*

—Margo Vader, *Take A Little Soul Time*

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*Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.*

—Thích Nhất Hạnh

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*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.  
When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed,  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

—Joseph Brackett, *Simple Gifts*

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.*

*We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.*

*We should like to skip the intermediate stages.*

*We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.*

*And yet it is the law of all progress*

*that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—*

*and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you;*

*your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,*

*let them shape themselves, without undue haste.*

*Don't try to force them on,*

*as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)*

*will make of you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit  
gradually forming within you will be.*

*Give Our Lord the benefit of believing*

*that his hand is leading you,*

*and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself  
in suspense and incomplete.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Patient Trust*, from *Hearts on Fire*

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*Spiritual joy arises from purity of the heart and perseverance in prayer.*

—Francis of Assisi

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*When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy.*

—Rumi

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*In everything, love simplicity.*

—Saint Francis de Sales

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*Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. ... We need not get frantic. God is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well.*

—Thomas R. Kelly

*The simple life does not begin outside. ... It begins inside with the quality of the soul. It is first and foremost the quality of sincerity, which is the opposite of duplicity or sham. Emerson's famous line, "your life talks so loudly that I cannot hear the words you say," makes the idea pretty clear.*

—Rufus M. Jones

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*Joy is not just about being happy. Joy is a rigorous spiritual practice of saying yes to life on life's terms.*

—Mark Matousek

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*Pure prayer begins at the threshold of silence. It says nothing, asks for nothing. It is a kind of listening. The deeper the listening, the less we listen for, until silence itself becomes the voice of God.*

—Stephen Mitchell, *A Book of Psalms*

## Scripture

*I know my God that thou lovest simplicity, wherefore I also in the simplicity of my heart, have joyfully offered all these things.*

—1 Chronicles 29:17 (Douay–Rheims Bible)

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*Be still and know that I am God.*

—Psalm 46:10

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*O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*

—Psalm 95:1

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*Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!*

—Psalm 95:2

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*This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

—Psalm 118:24

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*

—Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

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*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! ... I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

—Isaiah 43:18-19

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*Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow ... if God so clothes the grass of the field ... will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?*

—Matthew 6:27-30

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*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.*

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

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*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him. ...*

—Romans 15:13

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*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

—Philippians 4:6

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## Prayers

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Serenity Prayer*

*Lord, help me to live this day, quietly, easily. To lean upon Thy great strength, trustfully, restfully. To wait for the unfolding of Thy will, patiently, serenely. To meet others, peacefully, joyously. To face tomorrow, confidently, courageously. [Amen.]*

—Francis of Assisi

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*O God, I am seeking for ways to be less encumbered; ways to simplify my life; ways to build spaces and silences into a life full of busyness and noise.*

*Teach me to find that quiet center of self that you have hidden within me, a resting in your presence. [Amen.]*

—Jamie L. Watkins

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*Father, to You I raise my whole being,  
—a vessel emptied of self. Accept, Lord,  
this my emptiness, and so fill me with  
Yourself—Your Light, Your Love, Your Life—  
That these precious Gifts  
may radiate through me and  
overflow from the chalice of my heart  
unto the hearts of all with whom  
I come in contact this day  
revealing unto them  
the beauty of  
Your Joy  
and  
Wholeness  
the  
Serenity  
of Your Peace  
which nothing can destroy.  
Amen.*

—Frances Nuttall, *Prayer of the Chalice*

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console,  
To be understood as to understand,  
To be loved, as to love. [Amen.]*

—Francis of Assisi

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*Grant us strength and courage to love and serve you  
with gladness and singleness of heart. [Amen.]*

—Book of Common Prayer, p. 365

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*Lord,  
it is night.  
The night is for stillness.  
Let us be still in the presence of God.  
It is night after a long day.  
What has been done has been done;  
what has not been done has not been done;  
let it be.  
The night is dark.  
Let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives  
rest in you.  
The night is quiet.  
Let the quietness of your peace enfold us,  
all dear to us,  
and all who have no peace.  
The night heralds the dawn.  
Let us look expectantly to a new day,  
new joys,  
new possibilities.  
In your name we pray.  
Amen.*

—New Zealand Prayer Book, p. 184

## Spiritual Prayer Practices

### Receive & Release Prayer Practice

This prayer practice focuses on two words: *receive* and *release*. Here are some simple instructions for getting started.

- First, find a comfortable sitting position and begin to take deep, slow breaths.
- After you have relaxed and settled into the gentle rhythm of your breathing, begin to say the word “receive” silently in your mind each time you inhale, and the word “release” as you exhale. So, it’s “receive” as you inhale, and “release” as you exhale. These two words will also help to focus your mind whenever it begins to wander.
- As you repeat the word “receive,” imagine yourself receiving what God has to offer you and wants to give to you right now.
- As you repeat the word “release,” imagine yourself releasing to God what it is you need to let go of at this time.
- Start by doing this practice for three to five minutes (it can be helpful to set a quiet timer at the beginning).
- If you have a particular prayer concern, you can use this practice to assist you in finding peace and guidance regarding your concern. Bring the concern to mind as you begin the “Receive, Release” practice. You may even find that you are given a different word or phrase that comes to mind to use in place of “receive” or “release.” You might, for example, find yourself mindfully repeating “patience,” “kindness,” or “forgiveness” on your in-breath and perhaps something like “control,” “anger,” or “judgment” on the out-breath.

### Loving-Kindness Prayer Practice

*May you be happy.*

*May you be healthy.*

*May you be safe.*

*May you live with ease.*

Each time you say this prayer, first think of those you love. Then, as you repeat the prayer, you may want to bring in those you find challenging to love right now, and those you have never met.

## Centering Prayer Practice

A way to sit with God without using language. It is to consent to the Divine Presence within. Dwelling in God who dwells in us. The present moment is where we meet God and where we have an opportunity to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love.

**The Four Guidelines** (from Thomas Keating, *Contemplative Outreach*):

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. (You can pray for God to give you an image/word that is just what you need at this time.)
2. Sit comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and then silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts,\* return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

\* thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections

## Examen Prayer Practice

A way of paying attention as we listen for God. The Daily Examen is an ancient and powerful way of reflecting on the day so that we can more clearly identify how and where God has shown up in our lives and where God may be guiding us. Following is a brief description of the practice.

At the end of the day, sit quietly for a few minutes, seeking God's presence. Then:

- Remember times in the day when you felt most alive, and thank God for those moments.
- Remember instances when you felt the least grateful, and offer those with thanks to God.
- Notice times in the day when you experienced being aligned with God's purpose for you, and give thanks for those times.
- Notice any moments when you felt far from living out God's purpose for your life, and offer those to God.
- Ask God to help you live ever more closely to God's plan and purpose for you tomorrow, and then turn everything over to God to hold while you rest.

—For more resources, a good place to start is the Ignatian Spirituality's website: [bit.ly/38De8gc](http://bit.ly/38De8gc)

## Welcoming Prayer Practice

When used consistently, this prayer practice has the capacity to quickly and effectively dislodge us from our habitual reactions, emotional patterns, and limiting comfort zones. Using it can help move us through challenging or painful experiences, times of disturbed emotion or anguish, and even moments where unhelpful control tendencies and self-inflation takes us over.

### Three steps for the Welcoming Prayer Practice:

1. **Focus or “sink in”** to become aware and physically present to the particular experience or upset without analyzing or judging yourself or the situation. Don’t try to change anything at this stage—just stay present.
2. **Welcome and lightly name** the response that is being triggered by the difficult situation, such as “fear” or “anger” or “pain.” Acknowledge the response as sensation, and recognize that in this moment, if the experience is not being rejected or repressed, it can be endured. Ever so gently, begin to say “welcome,” such as “welcome fear,” “welcome resentment,” etc. Though this step is counter-intuitive and the impulse is most likely to try to push away the unpleasant emotion, Cynthia Bourgeault explains: “By welcoming it instead, you create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. By embracing the thing you once defended yourself against or ran from, you are actually disarming it, removing its power to hurt you or chase you back into your smaller self.”
3. **Transition to a “letting go,”** whereby the intensity of the situation can recede. This enables the natural fluidity of sensation to come and then go.  
—For more on the Welcome Prayer/Practice, go to: <https://bit.ly/2Sqtj0R>

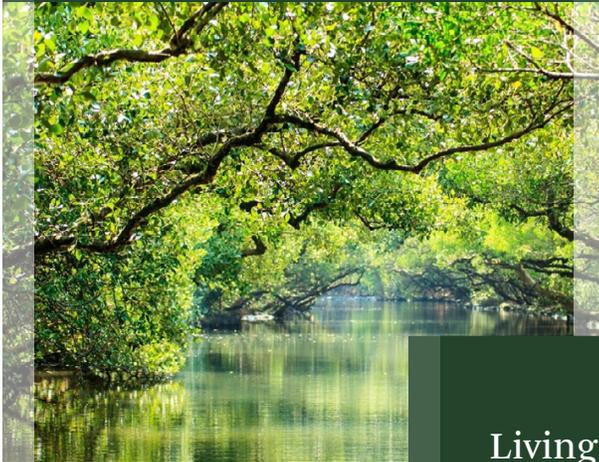
## Additional Practices in the Devotional

Please see the following pages for other practices:

- p. 14: Prayer Practice using *Be Still and Know That I Am God*
- p. 15: Gratitude Practice
- p. 17: Breath Prayer Practice

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