

“So Much Love In My Heart”



Twelve Christmas devotional reflections
based on thoughts from first-time parents

INTRODUCTION

I have been blessed with three loud, energetic, opinionated, beautiful children. It's the greatest joy of my life and by far the hardest thing I've ever done. In particular, the first days of welcoming a newborn into the world are a *wave* of emotions and some crazy inner monologue.

As I thought about creating a devotional resource for the Christmas season I thought it might be interesting to hone in on those first wild days of parenthood and use that as an avenue for reflecting on our life of faith and the true meaning of Christmas.

The Twelve Days of Christmas is not just a catchy song, it's also the actual length of the liturgical season of Christmas, taking us from Christmas day to the Day of the Epiphany (on January 6th). As such, this devotional has 12 entries intended to carry through this, the shortest of the Liturgical seasons.

I searched my memory and surveyed a bunch of parents to come up with twelve actual thoughts we had during our first days as parents. Perhaps these are also thoughts Mary or Joseph had during those first few days in Jesus' infancy. Each day of this devotional uses these unfiltered parenthood thoughts as a jumping off point for the day and, as you'll see, leads us to some interesting reflections as we consider our relationship with God, and the importance of Christ's birth for our lives.



December 25th

What's Going on? Are we doing this right?

When my first child was born it was all very, very, confusing. And overwhelming. In an instant everything changed. Overnight, it went from being just me and my spouse and now suddenly there was an entirely new person added to the equation. A new, little person who could not survive on her own. That first night with the new baby was a flood of questions and disorientation. Am I doing this right? Is this normal? What's going on!?

I think that's actually an appropriate space for Christmas. What a strange, overwhelming holiday. There are so many expectations, so much nostalgia, so much pressure that we put on this holiday. And the Christmas story also seems to carry this sense of bewilderment. What must the shepherds been thinking when the skies above Bethlehem opened up with choirs of angels? What were Mary and Joseph thinking when the shepherds explained why they had come to visit the newborn baby Jesus?

I know that confusion isn't an emotion we like to spend too much time with, but if we are willing, confusion can give way to wonder. The terror of the shepherds quickly gave way to amazement as the sky burst open with choirs of angels. The "What's going on!?" of new parents can quickly give way to "this is all truly amazing."

INVITATION: Today, embrace the wonder of this day. Remember and recall the awe of Christmas mornings of your youth. Look for small moments of wonder throughout the day. Or, go on a walk in a new place (don't get lost!) but connect with that feeling of novelty and reflect on what it means when the Bible says that God will make all things new.



December 26th
Is this normal? Should I call the doctor?
I'm calling the doctor.

Worry. Do not be afraid. Clenched fist, letting go, meditation. Parents experience so much anxiety and worry during those first days of a baby's life. It's obvious that this little child is fragile and entirely dependent on you. This pressure and sense of responsibility can give way to some rather frantic thinking. With one of our children we did have a doctor tell us bluntly, "you need to chill out."

I love how the Christmas story carries with it the refrain of "Do not be afraid." This is what the angel says when he appears to Zechariah to proclaim the birth of John the Baptist. "Do not be afraid" is what the angel says when he appears to Mary to proclaim the birth of Jesus. "Do not be afraid" is what the angel says to the shepherds when the skies outside of Bethlehem burst open that Christmas night.

I think one of the predominant messages of Christmas is simply this: do not be afraid. Yes, there is a lot in this life that can cause us worry, but God has chosen to be with us in the midst of all the worry and doubt.

INVITATION: Take a quiet moment for this "letting go" meditation. Begin by closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Then, clench your hands into tight fists. Hold this clenched position for several moments as you hold in your mind a situation that is causing you anxiety. Continue to clench your fists as you talk to God about this worry. Then, release your fists and feel the release in your hands and arms as you place that fear into God's hands. Repeat this process for any other worries you wish to release to God.



December 27th

The world as I once knew it is forever changed.

After the birth of your first child, there are so many adjustments that must be immediately made to your life. There's no longer time for all your previous hobbies and get-togethers. No longer can you spontaneously meet up with friends after work; everything has to be carefully scheduled and planned ahead of time because there is a new person in your life who is entirely dependent upon you.

The birth of a child changes your world. It ends a previous way of life and begins a brand new way of life. There's a term for this in the Bible, it's a term that's been misused quite a bit: apocalypse.

When I say that, I'm guessing you're thinking about The Apocalypse, when the world ends and Jesus comes again and there are lakes of fire and all sorts of other stuff that looks really good in Hollywood movies. But the truth is, an apocalypse is simply a drastic changing. A clear moment when one reality ends and a new reality begins. In this sense, the birth of a child is apocalyptic. Your life is never the same again.

And on a much grander scale, the birth of Jesus was also an apocalypse. The world was absolutely never the same after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Here we are, 2000 years later, still talking about this one birth!

INVITATION: Take time to journal or just think about how the birth of Jesus has changed your life. How would your life be different if you never heard about Jesus?

December 28th

To be honest, this is kind of boring.

One of the things that no one ever told me before my first child was born was just how boring the first months would be. Don't get me wrong, the sense of love I had for that tiny baby was palpable, but there was also so many long days where not a lot happened. Little babies sleep and eat and need their diaper changed. That's about it. But those little babies also are fully dependent on you for everything, so you can't do too much else.

I think we have a really bad relationship with the idea of boredom. To be bored is one of the worst emotions to face and should be avoided at all costs. We have so many gadgets and games and tv shows and movies at our fingertips all designed to keep that sense of boredom at bay. But I've begun to wonder if there might be something important about boredom. We all carry around a great deal of inner turmoil that we don't allow ourselves to face because we are constantly filling our days with distractions. We don't like boredom because it's in those empty spaces where we finally have to face the struggles we've been avoiding. One of my favorite lines in the entire Christmas story is Luke 2:19: "And Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart".

There was no Netflix, no iPhones, no Social Media in Mary's day. She couldn't quell her anxiety by simply distracting herself from all the world-changing events circling around her. Mary simply had to take it all in and quietly ponder the implications of all these strange Christmas events. I used to imagine this verse as Mary being really sentimental about everything, but now I see it as Mary being incredibly brave. She allowed herself to face all these thoughts about Angels in the night sky and giving birth to the Messiah while the Roman Empire continued to oppress and control her people. Mary treasured and pondered all of this when it would have been much easier to just ignore and avoid it all.

INVITATION: Boredom is hard and scary but, as I said, I think it might be really good for us. Take at least 10 minutes today to sit in complete silence with your eyes closed. Pay attention to the thoughts and emotions that arise when you allow yourself to embrace the boredom, rather than looking to escape it.





December 29th

I think I'm getting the hang of this...

In my experience, it's somewhere around day 5 when you start to get into a rhythm with a newborn. Yes, you're tired, but you start to fill like you've figured out how this all is going to work. It's a comforting feeling, to have a rhythm for handling the days and the nights and the tasks of getting meals on the table and keeping the house from becoming a total disaster. You know what needs to get done, you know how to manage the tasks, and you kind of know how the baby will respond.

When I think about the core message of Christmas, it seems to me that God knew exactly what we needed most. Christmas is all about God choosing to enter creation in order to be with us. God is not some distant figure that we can't access or connect with; God is the one who becomes a tiny baby, vulnerable and fragile, in order to better connect with us. When we feel vulnerable or fragile or lonely, the story of Jesus' birth reminds us that God chose to willingly embrace all of these realities. God intimately understands the emotions and struggles we face and God wants to be with us in that pain, to accompany us through it all.

INVITATION: The feeling of competence, in any area of life, is powerful. Today, take some time to consider what practices and activities you need in order to feel grounded in your life of faith. What commitments do you need to keep in order to grow in your relationship with God? What practices help you feel connected to the God who longs to connect with you?



December 30th

Never mind, I have no idea what I'm doing.

As I said yesterday, it usually takes 5 days to start to feel like you know what you are doing as a first-time parent. But that feeling doesn't last long. Babies are changing and growing so much during the first months in their life that it is almost impossible to develop any sort of routine or consistency.

So, just as you start to feel like you know what is going on you find yourself immediately thrust back into the despair and confusion of those first days of parenthood.

I'm sure that Mary and Joseph felt much the same way. Not just as first-time parents, but as two people trying to wrap their heads around the incredible task that God had entrusted to them. As is often the case with the mysteries and majesty of God, just as you start to grasp what God might be up to, you're suddenly back to feelings of confusion and doubt.

We need to realize that this is ok. Faith is not the same as certainty and we need to allow ourselves the grace to admit that sometimes we aren't certain about every little aspect of our faith. After all, that's why it's called faith. How could Mary and Joseph ever fully wrap their minds around the immense mission that their son was going to undertake. In the same way, how can we ever fully understand the bigness of God? Rather than trying to figure everything out, what if we gave ourselves some grace to not have all the answers? What if we learned to love the mysterious aspects of God?

INVITATION: Today, embrace and admit your questions and doubts. Take a blank sheet of paper and fill it with all your confusion. Draw pictures if you like, be artistic if that's your thing, but above all, be honest with yourself and with God and learn to love the uncertainty that lives in us all.

December 31st

Doesn't this thing come with an instruction manual?

Perhaps the hardest part about children is their inability to communicate. Yes, babies cry, a lot, but that cry could mean one of a dozen different things: I'm tired, I'm uncomfortable, I need to be changed, I need to be burped, I'm hungry, I want you to put me down, I want you to pick me up, etc. etc.

I remember going through a "liturgy" with each of my children when they were crying newborns. Pick them up and rock them; if that doesn't work, try and burp them; if that doesn't work, check their diaper; if that doesn't work give the baby to Amanda so they can eat; if that doesn't work, despair.

When I was a kid, I remember hearing a story during a Christmas Eve sermon that gets at this type of beating-my-head-against-the-wall despair.

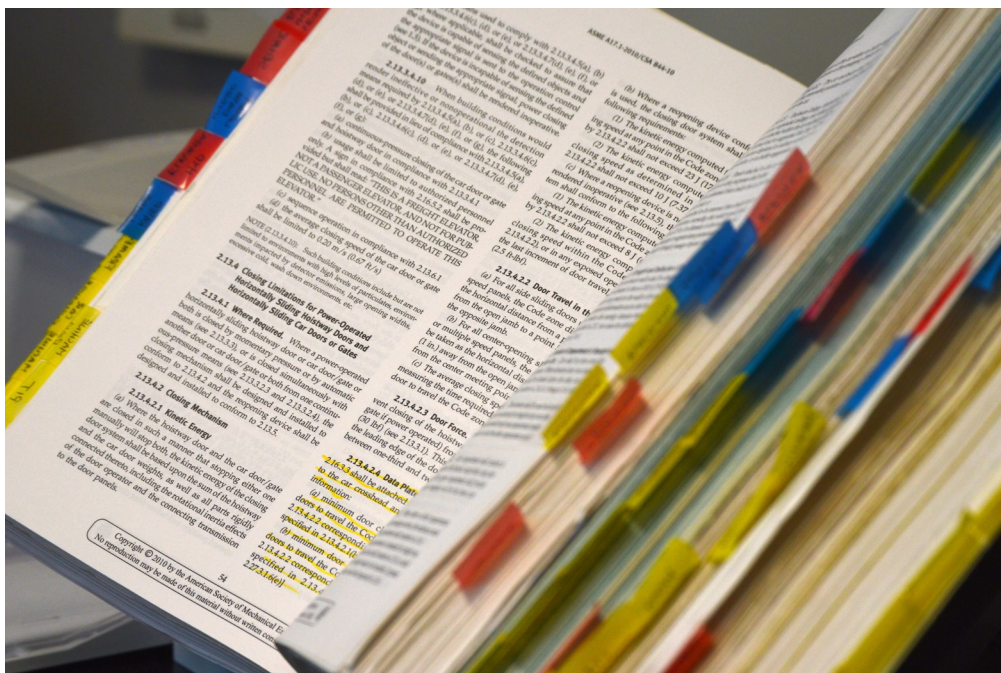
There was a man who stayed home while the rest of his family went to the Christmas Eve worship service. He was reading a book and sitting in his chair when he heard a knock at the window. He looked out but couldn't see what had caused the noise so he went back to his book, but then just a moment later, he heard another loud knock.

He got out of his chair to get a closer look when another loud knock came from the window. This time, the man realized what was happening. Birds were crashing into the window. The man tried turning off the lights in the room but birds continued to fly into the window. So, he went outside and tried scaring them away but had no success.

Finally, in desperation, the man was shouting, at the flock of birds, “Stop what you are doing! Don’t you realize that you’re just hurting yourself!” Then he said to himself, under his breath, “I just wish I could become a bird, so that I could help them stop this self-destructive behavior.” At that moment, the church bells rang signaling the end of the Christmas Eve service...

God becomes a human being in the person of Jesus to show us how to live. For thousands of years God sent prophets and judges and kings to try and guide God’s people, but finally, God had to become a human being in order to show us the way.

INVITATION: Take time to talk with God about some of your self-destructive behavior and decisions. How might Jesus be trying to show you a better way to live?





January 1st

**I didn't know it was possible to be this tired.
Will I always be *this* tired?**

The exhaustion of being a new parent is honestly hard to describe. I remember staying up all night for Youth lock-ins in High School or pulling all-nighters to finish a paper in college, but the days of consistently poor sleep that most first-time parents experience was a whole new level of exhaustion.

This is part of the reason why I'm not a big fan of the song Silent Night. I refuse to believe that anyone was sleeping in heavenly peace on the night Jesus was born. Perhaps Jesus was the perfect baby who slept through the night right from the start, but that just doesn't seem true to the full human experience.

The first sleepless months of having a child taught me to value sleep in a whole new way. I am not nearly the night owl I used to be simply because I've learned that sleep is far too important a commodity to sacrifice just to watch another episode of The Office that I've already seen. Here's the other thing, rest is actually an essential spiritual practice. When God created the heavens and the earth God set aside the 7th day for rest. God rested on the 7th day! So what is it that makes us think that we can work endlessly and exist on energy drinks and coffee? We need rest, and in fact there is something holy and sacred about allowing our bodies the grace to recharge.

INVITATION: Today, take a nap. Eat a big lunch and then just lie down for an hour and enjoy the chance to let your body recharge. This is a spiritual practice! To rest and respect our bodies connects us with God and allows us to become more fully the people God created us to be. Give yourself this blessing today.



January 2nd

I feel so isolated and lonely.

The early days of parenting are often extremely isolating. You are so tethered to your child because of their many needs so you can't go anywhere or really do much of anything. When friends would stop by just to visit it was one of the most welcome interruptions to those early days. Trips to the store for groceries felt like exciting escapes back into the world where other people lived.

This year, I imagine we can all resonate with these emotions just a little bit more than usual. It's been a very isolating year and that has reminded even the most staunch introverts just how important human interaction is for each of us. We were created to be with others. God never intended for us to go through life alone.

When I look back at human history this seems to be one of the undeniable core truths. People have always found ways to build communities and to share life together. Even though community is hard work, people kept doing it. God recognized this fact of human existence. Heck, God created us to be this way, and that's what makes Jesus' birth so deeply beautiful. God created us to be in community with one another and so God chose to be born as a human baby so that God could be in true community with us.

INVITATION: Reflect on the role that relationships and community has played in your life. Take time to call a friend or family member who you haven't talked to in a while and reconnect.

STOP
RELAX
BREATHE
PRAY
RESUME

January 3rd

I've never had to learn so much in such a small amount of time.

The above words were offered by a parent when I asked for honest thoughts about the first days of parenthood. I couldn't agree more with her sentiments. Learning how to bathe a child that can't sit up is difficult, add to that learning how to change diapers, properly heat bottles, swaddle, and dress this squirmy creature, all while sleep deprived—are you kidding me?! In a word it's overwhelming.

And yet, people have been finding a way to pull it off since the beginning of time.

There is a lot in this life that can feel overwhelming and I think that's why faith is so essential. Our belief in God gives us something to fall back on when everything else seems to be falling apart. Our faith tells us that God is still in control, even when everything else feels out of control. Our faith can give us reasons to hope, even when everything else seems hopeless. This simple belief in a being that is wiser and more powerful than myself can be enough to give us comfort at even the most dismal of times.

INVITATION: I confess that I can be rather easily overwhelmed. It's something I'm working on. One of the practices I've found that does help when I reach my breaking point is to take 5 minutes to myself to listen to music. I like to retreat to my bedroom, lie down with headphones on and listen to a song that reminds me of God's power and peace. It's never the same song twice, but that moment of calm to remind myself of God's presence in my life goes a long way. Even if you don't feel overwhelmed at the moment, give yourself this gift today.



January 4th

Despite it all, I feel such peace.

With each of my children I have fond memories of singing them to sleep as I rocked them in my arms and the only way I can properly describe those moments is “holy”. Even though I was exhausted, even though I felt in over my head, even though just moments earlier I had felt overwhelmed and frustrated, when they fell asleep in my arms it all just felt so holy and right.

Whenever I hear the line from Philippians about “the peace that surpasses all understanding” I think of these moments rocking my newborn children to sleep. It doesn’t make any sense. There are so many reasons why I should NOT be feeling peace at that moment and yet, despite it all, deep, soul-level peacefulness is exactly what I was feeling.

There’s a word for this soul-level, all-is-somehow-right-with-the-world peacefulness that the Biblical authors mention from time to time. The word they use is “Shalom”. Shalom is not just a fleeting peaceful feeling but it is God’s hope for all of creation. Shalom is a world-altering peace where everything is the way that God always hoped it would be.

INVITATION: Take time today to consider what shalom might look like to you. What would it mean for God to set everything right? What would a deep, soul-level peacefulness look like for all people?

January 5th

I had no idea I had this much love in my heart.

Of course, more than anything else, the emotion that nearly every parent connects to the birth of their newborn child is love. In my experience, all of the clichés are absolutely true. I never knew I could love someone so much. It's amazing how this little person can be just an idea one day and then the next day you can't imagine life without them.

It seems so appropriate that the season of Christmas is all about the birth of a child, because as I've been saying, the birth of a child is filled with love, and in so many ways this season is all about love.

The reason that God became human, the reason Jesus was born is love. God's love for humanity was so great that God chose the path of ultimate humility and became human. I love the way Paul describes it in his letter to the Philippians:

- ⁶ Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
- ⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
- ⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

I like to joke that “Home Alone” is the most theologically correct Christmas movie. “Home Alone” is all about being with the people that you love, despite your disagreements and conflict. On that first Christmas, God made the incredible decision to literally be with the people God loved.

INVITATION: Opening our hearts and learning to love just a little bit more is always a worthy endeavor. Today, take time to try a “heart-opening” meditation. Close your eyes and breath slowly and deeply. Please one hand on your heart and another on your stomach and notice how comforting it feels to connect with the movements of your breath and the beating of your heart. As you notice your heart beating, allow yourself to bring to mind the people you love. Don’t think about whatever might frustrate or annoy you about these individuals, just focus on the feelings of love you have for them. Then, with your hand still on your heart and eyes closed, take several breaths and allow yourself to realize that God holds these feelings of love for you. Let that Truth wash over you today.



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