

The Gift of Being Present



A Guided Reflection Journal

Introduction

Advent can be filled with worry about finding the perfect Christmas gifts. Deep down we want people in our lives to know they are special and that we love them. But sometimes we overlook the greatest gift of all... our very presence. Our spiritual ancestors were also worried — often about survival in the midst of political occupation. And the response of the scriptures is “the Holy Living One is with you.” Like a shepherd who never leaves the flock, we are held close. This season, we are invited to be the gift of presence for our loved ones, for our communities, for those who need it most.

This devotional journal is based on a worship series called “The Gift of Being Present” that draws attention to the importance of practicing mindfulness and how staying in the “here and now” has profound impacts on our wellbeing and quality of life. Each week we suggest a 4-step mindfulness practice from the book *Right Here, Right Now: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness* by Dr. Amy Oden. Studying this book during Advent may deepen your experience of the journal and the series themes.

You can use this journal just for your own reflection or make a point to get together with a friend or friends over coffee and bring up these topics for shared conversation.

Many blessings on your Advent journey!

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Week One Being Present with Hope



Our spiritual ancestors cried out in the midst of their political occupations: “Save us!” The idea of a Messiah went hand-in-hand with the need for God to help them in their distress. The Roman occupation of Jesus ’time and of the early Christian community is expressed with a sense of waiting, watching, and anticipation of restoration to freedom. All this points to the presence of hope, essential to survival in difficult times. Let us be present with hope to those who need it most.

*I continually thank my God for you because of the gift bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, in whom you have been richly endowed with every gift of speech and knowledge. In the same way, the testimony about Christ has been so confirmed among you that you lack no spiritual gift, as you wait for the revelation of our Savior Jesus Christ.
— 1 Corinthians 1: 4-7*

This week we focus on the gift of **hope**. We will train our senses to notice where we see signs of **hope** and how we can be a gift of **hope** to others. Let's begin with a practice to bring us the gift of the present moment:

1. First, take a moment to **become attentive to your breathing**. You don't have to change your breathing, just become aware of it. This can bring your focus to the present moment instead of past ruminating or future worrying.
2. Then become aware of **how your body is feeling**. Do you notice tight spots, tensions, aches? Do a body scan to see if you can identify anything. You can also just simply notice the feel of your feet on the floor or the feel of your body in the space where you are. We are extending our focus to the present moment by simply noticing "what is" in our bodies right here, right now.
3. Shift your focus to **what you are thinking or feeling in your mind and spirit**. Don't judge it or try to change it, simply notice it, like a boat floating by on a lazy river. We are practicing letting go of the cycle of reactivity by simply acknowledging, not doing anything about it. This is prayerful attention. Let God hold it with you, for you.
4. As you hold these things lightly or see them pass by, **what do you discover?** What do you recognize or realize about this moment in time that you might have missed before because of all the distractions around us?

You can use this practice any time of day, anywhere. Especially when things seem a bit chaotic and you aren't sure you can see the good in a place, time, or situation, try stopping and going briefly through these steps... breathe, feel your body in the space, notice what is coming up, discover through your senses the gifts around you that you might not have seen before.

**The gift of hope is an essential survival tool because it reminds us
that the hard times do not have the last word.**

Hope is not simply a wish.

**Hope calls us into action based on a belief
that things can be different.**

We can work to bring about the better world that we hope for.

**The places/people that need hope where I can make myself more present this
week are...** [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this
week — if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize
opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Hope this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or
make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfHope or #BePresent on your social media]

“The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is with us, no matter what, no matter where,
no matter when. There is no place you can go where God is not, no time of the day
when God is off the clock. This is the teaching of the Incarnation, God with us,
Emmanuel.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]

Week Two Being Present with Peace



Preparing the way for new beginnings, fresh starts, a clear path, is a classic theme in the faith narrative and in our own lives. Life can contain many chapters. The Good News is that the Holy One is continually making a way for do-overs. In this we can find peace, even when life doesn't feel so peaceful. This week we focus on what it means to be a gift of non-anxious presence for those who need it most.

*But what we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to the promise, God's justice will reside. So beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found at peace...
— 2 Peter 3: 13-14a*

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The gift of Christ's peace reminds us that we can have serenity even in the midst of non-peaceful situations.

Peace is not simply the absence of conflict.

Peace is an ever-present gift that we can open at any time when we stop, breathe, and trust that we are never alone.

And the gift of peace we can give is to be present for those who feel alone.

The places/people that need peace where I can make myself more present this week are... [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this week — if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Peace this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfPeace or #BePresent on your social media]

“As we strip away the cluttered surface of our lives and become more present in the moment, we may be disturbed by what we can now see in the open vista, especially the suffering of ‘the least of these.’ We are no longer numb to the cries of those hurting. We ache for the violence humans do to one another and to the earth. We see all people and all creation held within God’s love and life. Our comfortable lives are disrupted as we ask new, hard questions. But being more mindfully present will also bring greater awareness of God’s presence, peace, and clarity in the midst of it all.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]

Week Three Being Present with Joy



The words of the prophet Isaiah offer a prophetic vision that Jesus will also claim in his ministry. Likewise, we are called to claim the gift of being fully present with all people — those who mourn, those who grieve, those who have suffered indignity and oppression. Mary’s Magnificat is prophetic as well. She claims the overturning of injustice even before it has come to pass. Joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep conviction that we are called to be present in the work of bringing about “great things” — a better world for those who need it most.

Mary said: “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior. For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed. For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.”
— Luke 1: 46-49

This week we focus on the gift of **joy**. We will train our senses to notice where we see signs of **joy** and how we can be a gift of **joy** to others. Let's begin with a practice to bring us the gift of the present moment:

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4. As you hold these things lightly or see them pass by, **what do you discover?** What do you recognize or realize about this moment in time that you might have missed before because of all the distractions around us?

You can use this practice any time of day, anywhere. Especially when things seem a bit chaotic and you aren't sure you can see the good in a place, time, or situation, try stopping and going briefly through these steps... breathe, feel your body in the space, notice what is coming up, discover through your senses the gifts around you that you might not have seen before.

**The gift of joy is not the equivalent of happiness,
but rather the deep conviction that we are called
to be present in the work of bringing about “great things” —
a better world for those who need it most.**

**The places/people that need joy where I can make myself more present this week
are...** [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this week —
if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Joy this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or
make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfJoy or #BePresent on your social media]

“No matter how busy one’s day is with chores or service, or even religious duties, we
must stop and become aware, in the present moment, of God right here, right now.
Throughout the week, pause just for a moment to ‘practice the presence of God,’ so as
to be filled with joy.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]

Week Four Being Present with Love



The faith narrative is careful to show us a lineage from King David to Jesus. It is no ordinary lineage, it is one that began in the shepherding of sheep, of leading and delivering the people in search of a home. Mary’s womb becomes part of that lineage of love, offering the world the gift of God’s presence “in the flesh.” As we enter the story of the birth of Love Among Us, we are invited to be present in love with those that need it most.

Forever I will sing the wonders of your love, YHWH, proclaiming your faithfulness to all generations! I'll tell them that your love stands firm forever, your fidelity is fixed in the heavens.

— Psalm 89: 1-2

This week we focus on the gift of **love**. We will train our senses to notice where we see signs of **love** and how we can be a gift of **love** to others. Let's begin with a practice to bring us the gift of the present moment:

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**The gift of love is the essence of the birth of Christ.
The Holy One wanted to be so present to us
that God's Spirit became flesh in order to inhabit
the gifts of touching, healing, comforting, and challenging.
Love is the clarion call to us as Jesus 'disciples.
The more love we put into the world, the better the world will be.**

The places/people that need love where I can make myself more present this week are... [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this week — if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Love this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfLove or #BePresent on your social media]

“Every day we seek to discern how to live faithfully as we surf the Internet choosing which sites get our attention, as we choose news sources that will shape our worldview, as we buy groceries and steward our resources. We are always making choices about how we love the world that God so loves, how our attention, our presence, participates in the mission of God — abundant life for all.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]

Christmas Eve Being Present with Light



It is the night we celebrate the opening of the most precious gift of presence we know — the birth of the Christ Child, the Light of the World. As we light our candles, we open our hearts to becoming part of the gift of light in the world. Like the choice the shepherds faced, will we live in the shadows of fear, or will we dare to run to the manger to know and believe the Good News of new possibility for all who need it most?

The angel said to them, “You have nothing to fear! I come to proclaim good news to you—news of a great joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in David’s city, a savior—the Messiah— has been born to you. Let this be a sign to you: you’ll find an infant wrapped in a simple cloth, lying in a manger.”

— Luke 2: 10-12

This week we focus on the gift of **light**. We will train our senses to notice where we see signs of **light** and how we can be a gift of **light** to others. Let's begin with a practice to bring us the gift of the present moment:

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The gift of hope is an essential survival tool because it reminds us that the hard times do not have the last word. The gift of Christ's peace reminds us that we can have peace even in the midst of non-peaceful situations. The gift of joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep call to delight in the small things. The gift of love is the clarion call to us as Jesus' disciples. The more love we put into the world, the better the world will be. The gift of Christ's light is the reassurance that we are never alone.

The places/people that need light where I can make myself more present this week are... [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this week — if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Light this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfLight or #BePresent on your social media]

“The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is with us, no matter what, no matter where, no matter when. There is no place you can go where God is not, no time of the day when God is off the clock. This is the teaching of the Incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]

The Sunday after Christmas Being Present with Assurance



The overwhelming message of the Christmas story is the assurance that we, too, are children of the Holy One. In this, our very presence is gift if we will only allow the Spirit to move in and through us. Every day of our ordinary lives, we can show up — be present — and proclaim the assurance of hope, peace, joy, and love to those who need it most.

When the designated time had come, God sent forth the Christ— born of a woman, born under the Law—to deliver from the Law those who were subjected to it, so that we might receive our status as adopted heirs. The proof that you are children of God is the fact that God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of the Child who calls out “Abba!”
— Galatians 4: 4-6

This week we focus on the gift of **assurance**. We will train our senses to notice where we see signs of **assurance** and how we can be a gift of **assurance** to others. Let's begin with a practice to bring us the gift of the present moment:

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The places/people that need assurance where I can make myself more present this week are... [think of at least one act of being present with others that you can do this week — if you cannot think of one, simply keep your senses open to recognize opportunities]

I noticed the Gift of Assurance this week in... [jot down notes throughout the week here or make it a practice to post photos with #GiftOfAssurance or #BePresent on your social media]

As we have focused on the gift of being present in this season, we have “discovered God's presence with us in the middle of our messy lives and messy world. We alone cannot heal our lives or heal the world, but, if mindful, we can participate in what God is doing and where God is leading.”

[adapted from Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now*]