COMING Poor TO THE Manger

Advent Reflections on Poverty



Welcome

Goodness gracious, it's almost Christmas. Somehow, we've slogged our way through the year, and trust me when I really mean the word *slogged*. If you find yourself here, I imagine that you, like I, are *not at your best*. This is a prayer companion - a guide, an invitation, a resource, a little writing - for the tired. The weary-hearted. The lonely, poor, and un-thriving. But the fact that you *are* here, my friend, means that you dared to try again.

Your poverty - whatever lack you experience - is, I truly truly believe, an invitation to know Jesus in a new way. Maybe you've never come to Christmas impoverished before. Maybe you've come cheerful and open-hearted, ready to give, enthusiastic, and light. This feeling of being burdened, or being *the burden,* or feeling needy, or hurting, or angry, or just "poor in something"...it's new.

It's the worst.

I would wish it away in a heartbeat. In fact, I *have* wished it away many, many times. But like Paul the Apostle, after begging the Lord to remove the "thorn in my side", I'm starting to wonder if perhaps, Jesus knows what he's doing. What if, in fact, he wants that thorn there for me? For my benefit? For love of me? For something that I cannot comprehend?

My poor, poor, Jesus. Born into poverty, living in obscurity and rejection, dying naked and falsely condemned, buried in a borrowed grave. He could have chosen ***anything in the world***, and he chose poverty. So, when, as St. Francis de Sales says, Poverty comes 'knocking at your door', embrace her and welcome her as a cherished friend of the Lord. The ***nursemaid*** of Jesus. My poverty and yours might just have a home at the Bethlehem stable. Perhaps, if we, like the Little Iconic Drummer Boy (and many other saints...Mary herself of course) before us, bring ourselves to him on Christmas Day, that would be enough. You say you have no gift to bring that's fit to give a king?

Pa rum pa pum pum.

You have your **poverty**.

What I'm learning is that with the Lord, *that counts as quite a lot.* It's precious. So, pick up that Poverty and come along through a series of reflections for you to take to Our Lord this Advent. Let's meet him at Christmas **as we are,** trusting fully that he knows us well, and he has not left us alone. Quite the opposite, in fact. This Christmas, let's come to know more personally that Jesus came for us *in our poverty.*

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.

Reflection 1: Poverty

For week 1 of Advent (The Week of Hope)

Advent is such a beloved and *magic-tinged* season in the world, and in the Church. Its imagery and significance is rich. There's the light and the darkness, the waiting for rescue, the ache for the Savior, the preparation of heart, the hope in the promises, the weary world rejoicing...

...**and yet,**

this year, as I approach the feast of the King of Kings coming to save me, I'm struck by a feeling of devastation. That instead of joyfully wrapping my gifts and preparing my heart for his coming, I'm stuck. I'm in survival mode. I'm stumbling towards the finish line at the end of the year here, feeling worn out, threadbare, and like I have *absolutely nothing to offer.* Life has been beating me up. Circumstances have stolen all of my energy, creativity, effort, joy, and hope. I don't want to hear of New Years' Resolutions or "locking in" or "going deeper." I would just collapse into tears if someone offered me a quiet place to stay and rest the night without any responsibilities. Like Jesus, this season, I feel like I'm a worn out traveler in this whole nutty year, and I come to December to find there's no place for me at the inn.

I'm coming face to face with my own poverty.

Poverty.

What a humble, disappointing word. I don't want it. I don't want to claim it. I don't want to embrace it, or accept it. To be poor and needy, to be dependent and non self-sufficient, to be weak? Well, it's humiliating. The opposite of maturity. The opposite of the resilient, fend-for-myself person I've become. I associate my identity with its opposites: capability, maturity, virtue, strength, can-do attitude, resilience, joy, humor...

But Francis de Sales, dear Doctor of the Church and romantic lover of God, writes this about poverty:

"*See how Holy Poverty is even more gracious to you and presents herself to you at your own door. You have met her without seeking her and without trouble. Embrace her, then, as the dear friend of Jesus Christ, for he was born, lived, and died in poverty. Poverty was his nurse his entire life.*"

Poverty was his nurse his entire life.

Poverty, the nurse of Jesus?

Poverty, the friend of my beloved?

Poverty, a houseguest in the home at Nazareth?

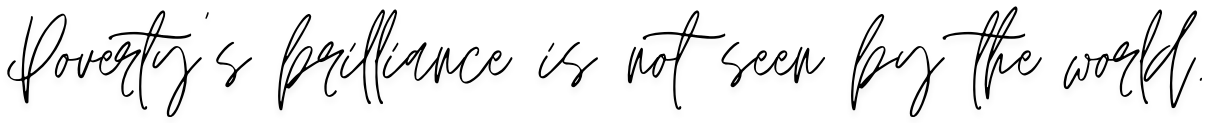
I can see Lady Poverty attending to Mary in the kitchen, when Mary didn't have the food she wanted to provide for the son of God. They added more water to the soup together. I can see Lady Poverty attending to Joseph as he strapped on his little son's shoes, wishing they weren't so threadbare. I can see Lady Poverty with them at the manger, of course, in the dark cave where the homeless couple gave birth to the world's savior. She was at their side when there was no room for them, and when they later fled as refugees to Egypt, and when they had to present the poorest offering of turtledoves at the Presentation of their son at the Temple.

Jesus was not the model of self-sufficiency and I-can-do-it power. In fact, he surrounded himself with *the poor,* clothed himself in *poverty,* died in *poverty* and humility, naked and stripped of every earthly comfort, and was buried in a borrowed grave.

The fruit of the third joyful mystery of the rosary is poverty. Poverty is intertwined with his birth, his death, his life. It's no accident. It's also no accident that today, you and I see poverty as so horrible, so undesirable, so avoidable.

But Saint Francis de Sales goes on to say,

"Put the precious jewel of poverty at its high value. Its brilliance is not seen by the world but it is surpassingly rich and beautiful."



So, you come poor to the manger, you say? You come poor in body, mind, spirit? Poor in friendships, in self-love, in virtue, in vocation? Poor in dreams, poor in skills, poor in self-image, poor spiritually?

You are in the right place. Jesus spent his life seeking the poor. Seeking you. Come to the manger, where he chose to declare his love for poverty and for us. Come and see him. Come empty-handed. Come, poor.

Reflection 2

For week 1 of Advent (The Week of Hope)

In the first week of Advent, we light the purple candle symbolizing *hope.* In my season of poverty and feeling like I had empty coffers, *nothing to give,* I hardly felt hope. I felt like I was at the end of the line. Nobody was coming to save me from the exhaustion of life. I was crawling through each day. Numbing out in whatever ways I could. Clinging from one small comfort to the next, never onto the Lord for sustenance. I was facing a real crisis of identity: *If I'm not the girl who can pursue her dreams and do the things and show up for herself and her friends...who even am I?*

Then, I invited Mary into my home. *She will fix things*, I thought! But things fell apart in a bigger way. We had to move. I was physically sick, often. I was at the end of my pregnancy, plagued with anxiety and fear and a swarm of practical steps that took it all out of me. I was not faithful to a daily rosary, or a daily Marian consecration commitment. It felt like Mary was a bad houseguest. She came, and uncertainty followed. I didn't feel more cared for and settled; I felt uprooted.

In hindsight, I can see there wasn't enough room for Mary and my idols to live with me. Mary came into my home, and she kicked out the things I was clinging to instead of the Lord. Where Mary goes, she makes space for Jesus. There was no room in my crowded heart for Jesus and for all my other gods. So, out onto the curb went my small comforts. She wasn't afraid of my poverty. I was. She wasn't afraid to bare me naked, like a good mom of a messy toddler. I was. She was full of hope. I was not.

Mary has all sorts of titles and names. They're for *us,* for our benefit, for us to get to know her in different ways. I found a few of these names for her were so full of hope. **Mary, Undoer of Knots. Mary, Star of the Sea. Mary, Refuge of Sinners. Our Lady of Perpetual Help. New Eve.**

Each of these is in reference to Mary as a helper. She will help. She will give hope. The Star of the Sea is a guiding light for sailors tossed about in the storm. The New Eve brings hope and healing to the Old Eve's poor decision & trauma, and she makes new the baggage from the past. She's not afraid to associate with the name "Eve". The Refuge of Sinners reminds me of Edith Stein's quote which says says, 'A woman's soul is fashioned as a shelter in which other souls may unfold.' Our Lady of Perpetual Help is not just going to help you once; the word *perpetual* is powerful and intentionally chosen. The Undoer of Knots is not inconvenienced by your tangled life. Invoke her by these titles. Go deeper.

Spend time with each of these names. Dive into what they really mean. Spend a few days of prayer considering each one. Looking up images of Mary & letting them speak to you. What does each name of Mary call *you*, relative to her? What message does she bring you?

Mary, Undoer of Knots

Mary, Star of the Sea

Mary, Refuge of Sinners

Our Lady of Perpetual Help

The New Eve

Reflection 3:

For week 1 of Advent (The Week of Hope)

There are many kinds of poverty, I'm learning. The most obvious is material. The physical hunger, thirst, lack of shelter, financial distress. But poverty is not *only* material or financial. It's characterized by lack. Not having what you need.

Mother Teresa famously identified the poverty of the West in this way: "*The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love.* ***The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty — it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality.*** *There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.*"

If we're honest, we all have felt poverty of this variety, but it's hard to talk about, name, or acknowledge. After all, it's not *dire,* right? It doesn't *count.* There's certainly no *virtue* in it.

At St. Francis de Sales' suggestion, I have started to try to get to know my own poverty better. As he says, Lady Poverty was Jesus' nursemaid. Many saints have sought her out, but if she has come to knock a my door, then I ought to let her in. Not scorn her or fear her. My own poverty comes, not materially, but in my sense of self. Maybe you can relate. I feel poor in my motherhood and my pregnancy. Impoverished in my physical health, my stamina, my energy, sleep, decision-making. Impoverished in my lifestyle choices and schedule options and reliability. The woman I was half a decade ago was accomplished, driven, and ambitious. If she said she would do something on a deadline, she would do it. If she made plans to be somewhere, she would be there. If she set herself a routine and plan, she would knock it out of the park. She might look disparagingly on who she has become in me. For me, I am not as put together. Instead, I am obedient to the calls of my day. Instead of forging through with my plan, I pivot. Instead of making my body and children adhere to the schedule, I change course. I cancel plans I wanted to honor. I tend to tantrums and leave my friends unread. I am up all night, and I do not make my early alarm. I wear less beautiful clothes than I would like, eat less nutritious meals than I aspired towards, and feel an overall loss of the sense of self I so confidently held.

It's *poverty.*

And to name it as such gives me clarity. I'm not just a "hot mess mom". I am, in fact, being stripped of whatever identity markers gave me so much life outside of God. I liked to be my own shepherd. (More on that later.) I liked to prove to myself and others that my life did have purpose and direction and momentum. Those things can be addictive. They were for me. Seeing this for what it is - poverty of self - has allowed me to see it as not a punishment imposed by God, or a season of being completely forgotten and unseen and reduced. I see it now as something God is allowing to happen to me out of love. He has sent his nursemaid to me. His friend. He has sent her to me because, despite what the world may see, He loves me.

So, what about you?

What kind of poverty has Jesus entrusted you?

There's the poverty of vocation, where you know you were made for something, and you aren't in that call yet. The single ache for family life. The rejection and disappointment of years of searching and waiting. The rawness of heart that accompanies looking for and waiting for love.

There's the poverty of loneliness. In friendship, in community. The feeling of being on the outside, or uninvited, or not thought of first. Seeing others move on, and being left behind. The feeling of pouring out constantly, and yet receiving nothing back. No village. No neighborhood. Nothing.

There's the poverty of emotion. The real, depressive, *gray* functional fog that hovers over so many of us. A combination of the pollution of comparison, watching others live fantasies on social media, the slog of adulthood that drains us, the workday that doesn't fill us, the constant reminder that we aren't where we want to be. And yet the poverty of 'best version of myself' energy to change and grow.

The poverty of healing. In diving into the work of healing my heart, I find pain and heartache. The dismal, exhuasting journey through the past to Jesus is not bright or sunny. It makes me want to turn back at every bend in the road. I feel like I'm losing much. Uncovering tightly-bound bandages. Coming to terms with what is inside my heart. It's impoverishing before it's fortifying.

The poverty of dreams. The poverty of infertility. The poverty of physical illness. The poverty of loss. She comes in many ways, but I find she comes to each of us, to ask us to carefully remove out coat of self-protection and self-sufficiency. If we let her, I think she will lead us to Jesus. Specifically, our naked, vulnerable poor Jesus in the manger, or our stripped, naked, poor Jesus on the cross. (He is, somehow, also the Victor King in disguise.) With our layers of clothing of self-protection and self-sufficiency on, we don't want to see or relate to a naked King. But if Lady Poverty can bring us by the hand to him, poor as we are, we might just meet him, and let him see us as we are, and begin to receive his love.

Spend time with the question, *What kind of poverty is Jesus entrusting to me right now? How am I poor?* Have a "conversation" with poverty. Try to get to know her. How long has she been visiting you? In what ways is she making you feel 'naked' or 'exposed'? Is there a 'coat of self-sufficiency' that you're wearing tightly? Is it possible for you to believe that through her, God wants to win your heart?

Reflection 4:

For week 1 of Advent (The Week of Hope)

Did you know that in the Song of Songs, the Bride rejects herself a few times and tells herself and her Bridegroom that she isn't worthy of his love? She dismisses herself, reflects on her own *poverty*, and concludes that she's a hopeless case. He should go love somebody else.

Hmmm. Sounds familiar to me.

In my poverty, I also reject myself on behalf of the Lord. I don't even really give him a chance to do it. It's less painful to be the one to name the problem. I don't want to feel so pitiful and pathetic as I try to approach God, so instead, I assess myself and declare, "I'm actually a mess. So, I'm not going to try this anymore."

But the thing is - the Bridegroom doesn't reject her. In fact, he draws her closer at her words. First, in Chapter 1, she says, *"I am dark and comely, like the tents of Kedar...do not gaze at me because I am swarthy, because the son has scorched me. My mother's sons were angry with me, they made me keeper of their vineyards. My own vineyard I have not kept."* In a slight paraphrase, she says, "I'm sunburnt. I'm dark. My skin is ruined. I've been out working in the fields, laboring. I don't look good. I didn't steward myself. I am a hot mess, and you shouldn't look at me. I don't even want to look at myself." A few lines later, however, she betrays her real desire for him by asking where he pastures his flocks. She ***does*** want His love. But she counts herself totally unworthy of it.

I mean, she's not wrong.

You and I are not wrong when we judge ourselves unworthy of God's love. But we're focusing on the wrong thing. We aren't supposed to "get worthy". We're supposed to get open. Look at what the Bridegroom replies to her...

I compare you, my love, to a mare
of Pharaoh's chariots.

He dismisses her self-criticism. He combats it. Swarthy? Sunburnt? No, he sees her as a mare of Pharaoh's chariots. The strongest, most magnificent, most gorgeous horse in all of Egypt. Top-pier. First-picked. Bred and cared for its entire life for this very purpose. The best of the best. The glossiest, fittest, fastest. You and I might not be used to being compared to a horse, but the comparison is clear. He marvels at her. He sees her differently than she sees herself.

She tries again. I mean, she's not going to let one little (lovely) compliment really undo her. In Chapter 2, she starts again with, "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys." To paraphrase and expand... *"I am like everyone else. There are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of other lilies just like me. I'm nothing special. The whole mountain is covered in lilies. I'm sure there's some more beautiful, taller, more delicate, softer, than I am. How can you even notice me? I am the most common flower ever. I'm boring. I'm un-noteworthy. I've been bypassed before, and I know that I'm just average. You can't possibly mean to pick me."*

He immediately replies,

As a lily among brambles,
so is my Love among maidens.

A lily of the valley? No. A lily among brambles. The only one like her. The one bloom among the harsh, dead field of thorns. The stand-out. The obvious beauty. The only one for him. He sees her *differently than she sees herself.*

Later, in the Song, she betrays him. Did you know that? He comes to her door (after lines and lines of love and affection are exchanged between the two of them), and she won't get up to let him in. She loses him. There's a chapter of trial, of testing her love, of refining her. And when it's all said and done, when her love has been tested and shown to be true, when she's matured and been fortified...this is what the Bridegroom says about her...

You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my love
Comely as Jerusalem,
Terrible as an army with banners.

Don't lean away from his foreign language. Lean in, and see what he means. He is comparing her to two powerful cities now: Tirzah and Jerusalem. Terrible as an army? He's speaking of strength. He's speaking of her power. The power of her love, now refined and matured. He's always loved her, but now he's in awe of her as well. He's amazed at what she's borne, and how she's come out refined.

Do you see? Her poverty - both how she was before she met him, and *even in her very sinfulness and weakness towards him* - did not cause him to leave her. Her poverty did not discourage him. So, why do you let it discourage you, Bride?

Oh, we have to be so gentle with our hearts. They're so easily disappointed. They so easily discourage us and disqualify us from God's love. Consider Peter, who, upon realizing how holy and good Jesus was, immediately reacted by saying:



This is what we do. We tell God to go away, to find someone more perfect, to choose someone else, to love someone else. We look at our very CREATOR who fashioned us with his own hands, and chose to bring us to life...and we say, "You don't know how bad I am. How poor I am."

My friend, it is not Jesus who does not know how bad and how poor we are. He's fully aware. We are the ones who are continually surprised at our own poverty. We are the ones who are shocked and discouraged when we fall again, when we fail, when we lack. Jesus is comfortable enough with this. He doesn't need us to come to him ready or rich or adorned. He seeks out the ones who are fallen, hurting, hungry, sinful, and lost.

So, this week, take to him your poverty. Name it, claim it, hold the New Eve's hand as you approach Him, and lay it down for him to see. That poverty is very precious to him. He entrusted it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not tell him to leave you or abandon you. Instead, ask him to hold you and welcome you. This is how we have hope in our poverty. This week of Advent is a week of hope. We have hope in God to love us, even when we do not find ourselves lovable.

Reflection 5: Neediness

For week 2 of Advent (The Week of Peace)

Oh, I *hate* being needy.

Neediness seems like the vice of our world. Or at least, my family and worldview tells me this is so. Don't be *needy!* Be self-sufficient! Be *responsible*. Think ahead so you don't get yourself in these situations where you need such dire help! Plan better. Be mature. Don't be so sloppy with your life. Neediness imposes on others. It makes demands on others. It crosses over the neat line where your life and my life run adjacent, and it makes a mess. Oh, I avoid it.

But, I have to admit, when I look at the life of Jesus...

...***he does not seem to avoid neediness at all.***

He hangs out with needy people. Sinners, the poor, the hungry, the lame. Sure, he gets tired of ministering and healing and preaching all day and needs rest. But he seeks out the lost. He looks for the needy. He chooses the imperfect 12 to be his disciples, knowing that they will need explanations, reassurance, patience, and *more of him* than other disciples he could have chosen. He could have headed to Jerusalem to vet applicants and found the most self-sufficient, productive, helpful, type-A, on-top-of-it disciples in all of Judea.

But he didn't.

He didn't even avoid neediness in his own life. He was comfortable to impose on others. To be constantly hosted, fed, invited in, cared for, donated to, etc. He could have chosen a ministry route that was much more self-sufficient. He could have saved up wages to fund his own ministry. He could have been born into wealth and used his money generously. He could have done many, many things besides the thing which he did: come to us as a humble, poor human man who asked for other humans' help. Women financially supported him. Sinners fed him dinner. Little children provided their food for his miracles. He put himself in a position of neediness.

Oh, reflecting on that hurts my pride. I want my life to be a gift to others. I want to offer so much to others. I want to bless them, make them feel loved, speak kindly to them, encourage them, coach them, use my gifts at their service...and in following Jesus, one big blatant horrible thing I do *not* want to imitate him in is being humble enough to be in poverty. Impoverished Monica isn't a great friend or a great spouse or a great daughter or a great anything! She **needs.** She is not thriving. She shows her cracks and her stress and her fear. I would like to banish her far, far away. In this week of ***peace,*** let's come to **peace** with our neediness.

Reflection 6:

For week 2 of Advent (The Week of Peace)

Somewhere in the first few chapters of a beautiful book on Marian consecration called ***The Fruit of Her Womb,*** Fr. Boniface Hicks makes some kind of comment about neediness. It goes something to the effect of, "God is not trying to get us to *outgrow him*, and not need him anymore."

This is a concept I had to sit with for a bit. At face value, of course this makes sense. God is our source of *everything.* We can't grow unattached from him. We can't get to a level of holiness in which we say, "Thanks God, I've got it from here! You go take care of somebody else!" All the saints show us in their spiritual intimacy, they are *closer* to God than ever before. *More* attached to him. *More* in union with him. They grow deeper with Jesus, not further away. Not less needy. But, in the world's perspective of parenting, this is a difficult thing. God our Father. With our earthly parents, there is a reality that they raise us to leave them. They succeed when we graduate, finance our own futures, move out of their basements, and live independently. They train us for years to have the maturity, virtue, and skill set to live on our own, because one day, they won't be there.

Now, I know I come from a more independent family than most. I was shocked to learn that my husband called his parents weekly, when we started dating. So, I know that my approach to God is influenced with a little more independence too. Though I'm the middle child and youngest daughter, I've got that strong sense of, "I've got this by myself now, God. Don't worry about me! Point me in the right direction, and I'll do a really great job here. You can check in on me later!" I know my mom appreciated that mindset a lot when I was growing up. It's the 'eldest daughter syndrome' idea of ultimate maturity and responsibility. It's the condemnation of neediness.

So, who is *really* surprised when I can't seem to approach God for daily bread? He wants to give me *daily* bread. He wants to provide me enough every day. I assume that the bread he gave me on Monday will probably last through Friday, if I'm responsible and I ration it. *Don't make a fuss on my account, God. I eat leftovers! No big deal!* I don't want to be that kid tugging on his tunic, begging for more, driving him nuts. I want to be the easy child for him.

But God my Father is not a human. He does not operate the way human parents do. And he is not limited, so whether he has 1 or 7 or 7 billion children, there's *enough of him* to go around. He is not asking for me to be the easy child at all. In fact, he does the opposite. In the desert in the Old Testament, he provides manna as daily bread.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Manna was designed to be *literally* daily bread. It rotted overnight. Very quick expiration date. If you hid it away under your mattress in a tupperware for a midnight snack, it rotted. If you tried to save some up 'just in case God forgets me tomorrow', it rotted. You know how we know that? Because *people tried it.* God explicitly told Moses that it was not to be saved up, and yet some of the sneaky Israelites thought to themselves, "*I hate being needy. I'm scared God won't come through. I'll take matters into my own hands, and I'll just work a little harder today so that I can rest assured I'll have enough for tomorrow."* Like, oh my goodness, it's me! If I had to pick a character that is me in the Old Testament, unfortunately and embarrassingly, the guy who is hoarding manna is the one.

That guy hoarding manna *doesn't want to inconvenience God.* He doesn't want to be needy. (He also probably doesn't trust God's power yet. He hasn't experienced a generous providing God in his entire life. We have to give him a little break.)

Jesus doubles down on the daily bread in the New Testament. When his disciples ask him to teach them to pray, he teaches them the Our Father. "*Give us this day our daily bread."*

This day.

That means that tomorrow, I'll have to come back and ask again.

I'll have to be needy.

I'll have to be poor.

If God intentionally trains his people not once but *twice* on the same teaching, we should probably zone in. He knows that the world despises neediness. His kingdom is not of this world. His parenting is not the same as ours. His outlook on poverty is not ours. It's time to examine your own heart. Do you avoid being needy? Do you feel like a burden to others? Do you hate asking for things? Do you work hard to be self-sufficient? Do you take that posture towards God too, and refuse to ask him for things? Refuse to risk enough to need him? Refuse to relate to him as an actual provider?

I'm right there with you. But as we approach Christmas and the poverty of our Baby God in a Manger, let's challenge our hearts on this. Can you possibly make peace with your neediness? Can you possibly see that God doesn't scorn your neediness? Your neediness makes space to invite him in. He comes to you as you are. He responds to your neediness. He provides for you.

Reflection 7:

For week 2 of Advent (The Week of Peace)

I am not thriving.

I am not even really doing very well.

These are thoughts that have surprised me when they have arrived at the doorstep of my mind in the past few months. I have been feeling *gray*. Colorless. Spent. Used up and drained. And with all the years of training I've had in how to pump myself back up, make good choices, set myself up for success, pivot, make it better with a sweet treat, or phone a friend for a pep talk, it's not just disappointing. It's identity-shaking. I don't want to be someone who isn't *doing very well*. Come on! I can spin anything into a lesson, challenge, adventure, or funny story.

But the reality of my life recently has been that I'm not thriving, and it's been ongoing. Functional? Showing up every day? Sure. But surival mode feels high. The dramatic representation of myself in a dark hole feels more real than the illusion that I'm just having a few off days. I cannot seem to put a bandage on this and tell my friend that I'll be all better by tomorrow.

Lord, can you really meet me *here*? Can you love me *here*?

Because, if I'm honest, my heart whispers accusations of your betrayal. Why are you letting me feel this way for so long? Why are you letting me stay trapped? I made my usual rounds of trying to improve myself, cheer myself up, and pretend I'm fine. Then, I started clawing for happiness and grasping at my identity as a happy person. Now, I'm feeling that numbness that accompanies giving up the fight. Healing or improving feels like effort. Spending time with people I love even feels like effort. When can I deliver honestly the magic words, "Oh I'll be better soon. Just in a funk!"

So Lord, if they say that you won't reject me here, then where are you?

Why are you content to sit in the dark with me?

You're the light of the world. You claim *I'm* a city set on a hill to give light to the world. So what are we doing here, you and me, sitting side by side unspeakingly in my pain?

You can *fix* me.

Part of me even seethes at the typical comforting verses I remember.

With God, all things are possible.

Oh yeah? Then why doesn't he help me?

In all things, God works for good for those who love him.

He is absolutely not working for good for me, and I have loved him a long time.

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you.

I just don't know if I believe you anymore.

"If you are willing, you can make me clean."
"I am willing. Be made clean."

You took care of so many people, but you are passing over me.

I take big, cynical swings at tried-and-true Scripture passages. I dismiss God's word. I can't stand the cliche. My heart is frigid towards a gentle reminder of God's love.

Maybe you can relate.

You know what I have learned from a very close friend of God?

All this raging and anger and despair - the deeper, angrier, more chaotic feelings I try to hide - is allowed. It's allowed to express to him. God can handle it. *He can handle me.*

The only man in the Bible described as a man after God's own heart spent over half of his psalm-writing in lament. David wrote about 73 psalms. Half the time, he's praising God. The other half? He's despairing. He's complaining. He's even accusing. He's heartbroken, bitter, afraid, raw, angry. He shows up to prayer and talks to God anyways. He's not thriving, and he lets God know.

He's got this wonderful little habit at the end of most of his psalms too. After a lengthy description of how bad he's got it, he concludes his psalm with one little line of hope. One little prayer of praise. One little "even so" moment. I think that is what made all the difference for him. That's what made him a beloved man of God. He trained his heart to YES be honest...and to choose to praise in the midst.

Me? I want to skip straight to praising. Skip straight to the peaceful part of the prayer where I say, "Oh God, I trust you completely. I'm not bothered by my feelings. I'm really content, no matter what you send me. I love you!" But that's skipping 95% of David's psalm. That's ignoring the churning, authentic, restless, needy poor part of me that is *experiencing.*

God doesn't want half my heart.

Half my experiences.

Half my honesty.

I don't know fully yet how God's plan for my suffering is for my good. I can't see the end. I am still in the midst of it. I am still in the fog. Unclear. Unsettled. Shakable. Unsteady on my feet. But I know one thing. God is with me. He hasn't left. He won't leave. He might not be changing things the way I'm asking for, but He's with me.

Jesus' words to the storm that scares his disciples are:



Sometimes, I pray with a song from Disney's Frozen The words of Elsa's reprise feel real to me: *No escape from the storm inside of me.* But Jesus calms storms. He brings peace. This week, whether anything changes at all in terms of your thriving or surviving, be at peace with this one thing: He is with you.

Reflection 8:

For week 2 of Advent (The Week of Peace)

St. Francis de Sales wrote extensively to his spiritual directees about how to live the ordinary life well. He often wrote to women, mothers, and widows. He had to speak practically. He couldn't just give them theories about God or comforting cliches. So instead, he gave them advice on how to find God *throughout* their day. Francis was not about a performative faith, or looking like you have everything together. He totally embraced the neediness of humanity. He loved the Song of Songs, and the pursuit of the Bridegroom despite the imperfections of the Bride. So, when any of his spiritual directees had a flair for perfectionism or for covering up their neediness or poverty, he instead taught them things like this.

"Imitate little children who **with one hand hold fast to their father** while with the other they gather strawberries or blackberries from the hedges. So too if you gather and handle the goods of the world with one hand, you must always **hold fast with the other to your heavenly Father's hand** and turn toward him from time tot ime to see if your actions or occupations are pleasing to him. ... In ordinary affairs and occupations that do not require strict, earnest attention, you should look at God rather than at them."
-P3 Ch10 Introduction to the Devout Life

I don't have any distinct memories of picking berries with my parents, sure. But I can imagine this scene. A little child and his father together, picking blackberries from the hedges. The father isn't annoyed, hoping that the child will learn to do it by himself. The father isn't urging him, "If you use two hands, you'll be faster!" The father isn't complaining that it's taking them awhile to walk at a child's meandering pace. No. The Father brought him out there to do this ***together.*** The point was unity.

The point of our daily lives with the Lord is unity. Anything we do throughout our day, we can do **with him**, or we can stress ourselves out to do "**for him**" in some hope that it'll please him better.

Where did we get this idea that if we can do it *for him*, it'll make him happier?

When I was a young missionary, there was a talk given in our programming on the Holy Spirit and the Great Commission. It was intended for a young audience, and it was illustrative, loud, fun, and simplified. It didn't go into nuance, heart posture, or this concept of unity. The ultimate illustration given was this catchphrase: ***Tag, you're it!*** The idea is that Jesus says to his apostles, "I have been with you and taught you for years! I have equipped you. Now, I'm sending the Holy Spirit to you at Pentecost, and he will empower you with everything you need to go do this Great Commission. Tag, you're it. You're in charge now! You're the one to run and go on mission! You can do this!"

Fun, right?

Encouraging!

But for someone like me?

Burdening.

The message of Pentecost was never meant to be "Tag, you're it!" in the way that tag is traditionally played. The tagger is solely responsible for achieving the next thing: tagging the next person. When you're "it", you're the only one that's it. It's fast-paced. Demanding. Exhilerating. There's no father-holding-your-hand-whilst-picking-blueberries.

I think it's a fine analogy to invite the youth of the church into understanding that *they have been entrusted with part of the mission of the church.* That their faith isn't something they just attend, critique, or receive. There's active participation. There's responsibility and movement. The work of sanctification internally is life-long. The work of forming others, evangelizing, inviting, tending relationships, and participating in healing in others is never-ending.

But. But. But.

The Holy Spirit does not ***tag*** me and leave me. He doesn't, as the game works, run away from me and make my work solo. Jesus didn't ascend to Heaven to watch me from his throne and see how I'd measure up in the grand call he's given me. And when I implore his help throughout my day, I'm not *bothering him.* It's not that I'm an inadequate tagger, and that he chose a weak person to be "it". *It's that this was not the model.*

God factored in my weakness and yours when he called us to the life we live. He isn't using us to get to a different soul. He's not disregarding our needs in order to position us for the greatest impact. He's not asking us to 'hang in there buddy' so he can use our lives to make his kingdom great. He doesn't *need* you and I to help him at all.

That point may seem small, but trust me, I was hung on it.

It felt like I had to be the easy kid. You tagged me? I'm on it. I'm running everywhere. I'm working tirelessly. I'll tag them all you'll see. **You'll be proud.** No, I don't need help. You sit down, God! Or better yet, you go work on an "important" project like starvation or third world countries or slavery or converting whole nations! I'll run around my little community, family, neighborhood, town, and vocation and do all the tagging. I've got it covered.

How different is this image of my life than the one Francis offers. The blackberries-in-hand Father seems too good to be true.

From my place of poverty of heart, I don't even know a real conclusion here. But I invite you to ask alongside me,

God, will you show me who you are and how you expect me to live?

Reflection 9:

For week 3 of Advent (The Week of Joy)

Last year, around this time, I declared a season for myself in Advent that I called jokingly, "Joy to the Girl!" (You know, Joy to the World? Ha. Clever.) I have long-since been known for my joy. I was a happy child. I am an enthusiastic, joyful member of the team. I find optimism and encouragement easy. And I wanted to lean into joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. I love a prayer plan. (And, I truly think they work! Shameless plug to check out the Permission in Prayer DIY guide that my friend Makenna and I made!)

So I assembled one on *Joy to the Girl*. I pulled all the saint quotes, songs, and Bible verses I could find about joy into a document. I printed and bound it, and spent the mornings of prayer "shopping" my list to start a conversation with the Lord about it. My journal was peppered with little illustrations of JOY JOY JOY! Lyrics like "rejoice" and "joyful joyful we adore thee", "joyful and triumphant", "echoing their joyous strains" danced across my page. I wanted a heart full of buoyant joy in the King. In a burst of inspiration - and misunderstanding - I thought I'd tackle the book of Isaiah too. There's a *lot* of sweet Christmas prophecies and works of comfort in there, and I wanted to feel rich in joy.

I didn't know a few things. First, the book of Isaiah is actually really sad. *Most of it* is really sad. It's 66 chapters long, and the first 40 of those are *woeful.* He, like the other major prophets, has a 'Book of Consolation' nestled into his writings (Chapters 40-55), but in his time, he was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Israel, telling the people to repent. His messaging was severe and sad, because he was warning them of impending doom. Assyria was coming to take Israel down. Later, Babylon would come to take Judah down. There would be an exile. The people's faithlessness to God would be punished. Yes - he's called the 'Fifth Gospel Writer' because he has soooo many prophecies about the Messiah coming...but the majority of his work is *doom.*

So imagine popping open the first few chapters of Isaiah in early advent, looking for joy.

Nada.

Forging ahead, poring through the pages, chapter by chapter, looking for that Christmas joy! At Chapter 7, you get an Emmanuel prophecy, but it's kind of reluctantly, back-handedly delivered. Hmm.

Nine chapters in, you get this breath of fresh air, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. A light that will shine on all those who live in the land of the shadow of death."*

You think you've made it! We're here in the Joy of Isaiah! But no...we're back for 30 chapters in darkness, waiting. Waiting, Waiting. Chapter 11 gives us another hint with the whole "stump of Jesse" propehcy, and Chapter 12 tells us, "With joy you will draw waters from the wells of salvation!"

But it just isn't lasting. It isn't sticking. Chapter 13 brings us right back to the wrath of God. Chapters 25-26 are songs of praise in the midst of persecution. Chapter 30 has a few lines about God hearing his people's cries and giving them better than the bread of adversity. Chapter 35 has a moment of hoping in God.

Then finally, Chapter 40.



Huh. Well, that was not as expected.

The joy was *poking through* the hardship. It was not consistent at all. It was not all-encompassing. It wouldn't define Israel's "season". Little did I know, but God was giving me a little hint at what was to come for me in the coming year. 2026 was one of the most difficult years I've had. And I know I write that as a young woman with only so many years under her belt, and only so many difficulties faced. But if last year Monica, the optimist and pioneer of joy, had known what she was getting into when she dipped her toes into *joy,* I think she would have steered clear.

On Christmas Eve, I miscarried.

I came to the altar on Christmas morning, bereft of joy, and considerably confused.

I spent the next few months uncertain, afraid to dream in my usual January habits, clinging to the example of joy I've looked to in the past (in the form of my hero Paul Coakley), and feeling strangely numb. And in March, when we were blessed with another pregnancy, I entered into nine months of prenatal depression. There were good moments, joyful times, and blessings, yes. Nine months, like forty chapters, is a long time to go without *anything.* Yes, there was joy in small forms. Poking out, as in Isaiah.

But I come to Advent this year with a weary heart. Gray. Drained. Not even particularly seeking joy. Seeking involves effort I don't feel I have. Just, coming to Bethlehem because this is the way we go at this time of year. Almost done with this pregnancy. Filled with disappointment in my mind and body, but grateful for new life all the same. Plodding along.

This is not the Joy I was after. In this year, I met a new friend. Elizabeth Ann Seton. On the outside, I thought her life was marked by success, inspiration, dreaming, and entrepreneurship. Much like I approached the thought of Christmas Joy, I approached her: Elizabeth! Show me how to have what you have, and build what you built! You vibrant, impressive widow who built an empire of Catholic schools and changed the country's education system! You are what I want!

After walking with her slowly and hearing her life story, however, I realized I was wrong.

Elizabeth Ann Seton is a saint because she persevered. **She didn't quit.**

She didn't live a glorious life. She lived a life of suffering. There were pockets of God's providence, joyful moments, yes! But in all, she did what God gave her grace to do next. She didn't dream of starting a school. But a school was needed, and she was able. She didn't dream of becoming Catholic! But she couldn't resist what truth she had to acknowledge. She didn't want to be a stand-out pioneer in the country, or communicate with Bishops, or start a religious order. She wanted to live on Wall Street with her sweet William and babies, and be happy there.

But God called her to more. To different. And she said yes, time and again. Yes, when her husband died. Yes, when her children died. Yes, when her family was difficult. Yes, when she had to leave her home. Yes, when she was abandoned by close friends and confidants. Yes, when her best friend passed. Yes, when she was almost removed from leadership and overlooked in favor of another woman. Yes, when her daughter almost ran off and married a Baltimore boy. Yes, when her sisters-in-law came to see her, and died under her care. Yes, when she had to send her sons off into the world and release control of their futures. Yes, when she didn't see the impact of her labor even at her death.

Now, there's a massive, gorgeous shrine dedicated to her in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Now, she's a household name across the country, and hundreds of institutions are named for her.

But then? In the action of it?

She lived with Poverty. Poverty of family and friends. Poverty of widowhood. Poverty materially in the country outskirts in Maryland when she was used to New York City. Poverty in priest leadership when her spiritual directors were changed often. Poverty in consolation. Poverty in health.

I have come to believe that perhaps as I approach Jesus at the stable in Bethlehem looking for Lady Joy, I will find Lady Poverty there too. She will show me all the saints that she has been close friends with - all the heroes of mine that she's led here to this very place - and I will realize that I am in good company.

Reflection 10:

For week 3 of Advent (The Week of Joy)

What if you and I are Jesus' Bethlehem?

Jesus Image has this gorgeous worship song called *Make Me a Bethany* that I just adore. The concept of being a place for Jesus, a *resting place* is very beautiful to me. Bethany is where Mary, Lazarus, and Martha lived. It's where Jesus was annointed, where he visited multiple times, where he raised Lazarus, of course. These were his friends. This was his place, more than his home in Nazareth, where he felt he could relax.

I want to be Jesus' Bethany! You and I are temples of the Holy Spirit. We are dwelling places for God. And, in the mystical amazing phenomenal way that Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist, bodily, physically - he visits *within us.*

We are the place he dwells.

I don't know that I'm a Bethany in this season, but you know what I feel I am? I am a Bethlehem. I am the unkempt stable that nobody desired. I am the poor place where Jesus somehow *chose* to be. That Bethlehem stable was *chosen.* Jesus chose to be laid down in a feeding trough in the 'House of Bread' (Bethlehem's name). The Bread of Life, the New Manna, the Eucharistic Lord. He told us from the beginning, from his choice. Years and centuries earlier, young David shepherded flocks in Bethlehem and pondered God as the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23. And here, the Good Shepherd came to dwell among the sheep and poor shepherds who received the news of his birth. He chose Bethlehem and shepherds.

What a joy to be chosen!

This week of Advent is the week of Joy. I just cannot help but realize with joy that God's relationship to my poverty of heart is not *avoidance.* He doesn't keep me at arms' length because I am inadequate. He chooses to be with me.

You know, Jesus chose to grow up in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. Galilee was considered po-dunk. The country folk. The nobodies of the north. The 'Gentiles of the Jews'. They were far less important than the city-folk of Judea in the south, where Jerusalem and the Temple were. That's where Jesus chose to grow up, in obscurity. It's where he chose to minister for a long time. He also chose poor disciples: fishermen, laborers, a notable tax collector of course. In one of my favorite stories ever, when he encountered a wee little tax collector in a tree (Zaccheus) in Luke 19, he told him he needed to have dinner with him. He chose the company of Zaccheus. Of Mary Magdalene. Of Peter the denier. Of lepers and cripples and widows.

Let's return to Zaccheus for just a moment. In Luke 19, Jesus sees him in the tree and goes to his house for dinner. This isn't a popular choice. In fact, the crowds get upset. They *grumble. "*

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.

Well, well, well. I have heard this one before. My own heart likes to say something similar to me. "*Ugh, Jesus won't want to come visit you. You are being pitiful. You used to be holy. Why are you so difficult and miserable? You are a sinner. You have fallen so far from who you used to be. Jesus surely is disappointed in you."*

Ugh, Jesus has gone to be a guest of Monica?

And Jesus comes out of that house to speak to the crowd. He doesn't let that one go. He turns to the crowd and says, "He too is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

Zaccheus was not an unintended detour, or a charity case. ***He came for Zaccheus.***

He came for the sinners.

I like to imagine that Jesus, with his fearless honesty, says to the crowd, "Visit him? You are shocked I am visiting him? **I came for him.**"

Visit him? I came for him.

Me and my poverty are the entire reason that Jesus came down from Heaven. Not because I am well. Not because I can save myself or get holy on my own or live a life worthy of my call. No. Because I am a sinner. Because I am Zaccheus too. Because I am *the lost* and Jesus came for me.

You and I - poor and sinful and needy as we are - are on the list. **We are on the list that Jesus came for.** We are chosen. We are like Bethlehem, the manger, Nazareth, the disciples, Zaccheus, and many others. Jesus isn't disturbed by our poverty. He is well-aware of it. And - joy of joys - he chose us anyways.

Jesus, make me your Bethlehem. When I approach the manger this Christmas, I will know that I am welcomed. You want me there. You want me as I am.

Reflection 11:

For week 3 of Advent (The Week of Joy)

If we're spending this time talking about the joy of being chosen in our poverty, we have to spend another moment on the Song of Songs. As we discussed in an earlier reflection, the Bride tries to reject herself on behalf of the Lord. I want to turn our attention to another aspect of this.

There's this hidden analogy that my heart clings to in this Song, that the Bride is the Bridegroom's **Garden.** Her heart is his garden. Let me take you on the journey. Hang in there - we will fast-forward through the Song.

In Song of Songs 4:12, the Groom describes her as
"***A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride. A garden enclosed, a fountain sealed."***

A few lines later, she replies,
"Let my lover come to his garden and eat its fruits of choicest yield."

In response, in the next line in Chapter 5:1, he says ***"I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride."***

So she's invited him to come to her, and he has come.

Earlier, he wants her to do an odd chore with him. ***"Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that damage the vineyards; for our vineyards are in bloom!"*** He wants her to go fox-hunting with him, to protect the vineyard. The garden. The sacred space that they share.

When the bridesmaids ask her, ***"Where has your lover gone, most beautiful among women?"***
She replies in full confidence, ***"My lover has come down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens and to gather lilies."***

But what she really *means* and is saying is that she has been seeking her Bridegroom for a long time...and all along he has been here. Within her. In her **heart.** The garden of her heart.

She matures throughout the Song. Her love is tested and is found worthy. The Bridegroom in Chapter 6 is amazed at her and her transformation, but before he's sure that she's ready for him, he does something odd. He goes down into the garden. He's checking if the seeds he's planted have in fact matured.

"To the walnut grove I went down, to see the young growth of the valley; to see if the vines were in bloom, if the pomegranates had blossomed."

I know, a lot of quotes here. (Please check out my 2026 Lent Song of Songs Miniseries on the Catholic Bible Pod with Mon if you want more details about the Song of Songs. We go deep!)

Essentially, the analogy is that the Bride's heart is the garden. It's the vineyard. It's the place where she meets her spouse. It's where he comes to knock, where she locks him out, where they catch the foxes that will ruin their love, where he plants seeds, where she bears fruit. It's enclosed and locked. She alone has the power to invite him in. In the Song, she both opens up to him, and refuses to do so as well.

I love this idea, because when I think about my heart as a Garden for the Lord, suddenly, it seems to be more beautiful. The time I take to care for it, steward it, nurture it - it matters. Because it's where God will come. The work of healing is not inherently selfish; it's inherently loving towards my Jesus, who has chosen (oh joy!) to come to me, to my heart. Yes, my heart is poor and impoverished. But if it's a garden, then I can do things to help it. I can water it. I can weed it. I can tend it. I can be patient with it.

Gardens need the seasons. They look bare and dead in the winter, but you cannot rush them past that season. They spend an entire portion of the year *doing nothing* externally, looking like a sad patch of dirt...until they sprout flowers. The seeds need that time. The soil needs that time. The poverty of their season of winter - no blooms, no harvest, no abundance - is necessary.

Seeing my heart as God's Garden has made me more merciful and attentive towards myself. I want you to pray with it too. What is it like, to steward the Lord's vineyard? A place he loves and delights in, a place he visits?

There's a children's book called the King of the Golden City which is an analogy of a child preparing her heart for the King's visit. It's about First Holy Communion, but it's really applicable in general for preparing our hearts for the Lord. Though she lives in a small cottage, she still can do things to steward and prepare for him. Her poverty is not the problem. If she lacks love and lacks desire to host him well, that's the problem.

You and I? We may be in poverty. Crawling towards Christmas, feeling like nothing we are doing is beautiful, good, abundant, or harvest-ful. No blooms to be seen in our lives. And yet, if you and I are God's garden, then we are beautiful to him.

Chosen.

A last thought? Every single time the Song mentions the Garden, it uses the word "down". The Bridegroom comes *down* to the garden. *Down* to visit her. *Down* comes the Godhead Incarnate to the world to woo and pursue us. *Down* into our humanity to choose us and reassure us of his love. He stoops low. He humbles himself. The song "Just to Bring Me Home" by Damascus (Abby Randolph) is really a beautiful expression of this humility and deep pursuing love. I encourage you to pray with it.

Reflection 12:

For week 4 of Advent (The Week of Love)

We started off thinking about the Little Drummer Boy, and now we return to him. He's a fictional character, not actually cited in Scripture, but easy to imagine in the nativity scene. The lyrics of the song are punctuated by the beat of his drum, giving the listener a moment to absorb the simplicity and sincerity of what he just said. I, obviously, really like the song.

Like Peter & like the Bride of the Song, the Little Drummer Boy's first instinct is to identify reasons for his own self-rejection. Like the Bride's, "I am dark!" and like Peter's, "I am a sinful man!", the Little Drummer Boy says to the inviter, ***"I am a poor boy too! I have no gift to bring that's fit to give a king."***

But *unlike* Peter and the Bride, the Little Drummer Boy decides not to reject himself. He offers what he has. In the next line, he says, **"Shall I play for him?"**

I just get caught up in this line. He offers - tentatively, perhaps - the one thing he has. It's me, sitting on my kitchen floor building blocks with my toddler, saying, "Shall I build with blocks for him?" It's me, waiting in traffic to the sound of my crying child, saying, "Shall I be patient in my suffering for him?" It's me, up at night with pregnancy aches and pains, saying, "Shall I keep him company in my insomnia?" It's me, in my poverty, offering all I have. "I don't have what I want to give him. But I can give him what I have. Is that good?"

And Mary nodded.

Then he smiled at me.

Me and my drum.

The King smiled at me, at my small offering. At my poverty. At my sincerity. At my attempt to love him.

In my heart as I reflect on this, it's all very beautiful. But, as I've been reflecting on poverty in between writing this, as I've been going about my day feeling exhausted and discouraged and poor, I still find my heart unhappy. It's not perfectly consoling to know that my poverty pleases the Lord. Just yesterday, I stood at the counter making dinner with my toddler's demands ringing out across the apartment for a diaper change. Moments ago it was a stubbed toe. Before then, it was the demand to take the apron off, right after we had put the apron on. Her tower is still in my way, blocking my drawers and cabinets, but it's there because not ten minutes ago, she had begged me to help with dinner prep. The same dinner prep which she is now demanding I be done with, and every time I make a loud sound, she shushes me. I am up to my elbows in raw chicken, down to my last nerve, and I find myself looking to Jesus.

And my heart isn't saying, 'Wow I am so close to you right now.'

It's saying desparately,

Is this really pleasing to you?
Because I do not feel very close to you right now.

Like, really Lord? Is this it? Have I reached the poverty level, the hair-pulling, tear-stained, weary-to-my-bones, aching pregnant belly poverty level that you ordained for me today? And is it doing anything to bring us closer together? Because I just feel alone.

Nothing happened. No moment of intimacy or union. No wash-over of grace. No, I washed my hands, found my toddler in her crying fit, coaxed her gently into a diaper change that she had been avoiding because of her diaper rash, let my soup stick to the bottom of my pot because it took so long to be present to the toddler, and got us out the door for our appointment 5 minutes late. In the car, I cried.

And in the car, I reached for a song about Jesus.

I listened to, "Hallelujah Anyway" by Rend Collective. And then "You're Not Finished Yet" by Natalie Grant. And then "Flowers" by Samantha Ebert. And as I drove and cried and tried to praise God when I felt empty, a small truth settled in my heart. A fruit of poverty. When I am poor, I have empty space within. I have room to long for the Lord.

When my heart is not full of other things
I have room to long for the Lord.

I don't love the feeling of longing. I want to be happy and satisfied ***now***. I want to be overjoyed by the life I have now. But instead, I feel the ache for God and for Heaven and for his Promises for me. Poverty gives me space to have **need** and **want** and to desire the joy that I do not feel.

If I hadn't been feeling poor, perhaps I wouldn't have needed to reach out to God at all. Perhaps I would have tossed a grateful glance in His direction, but I don't know. I do know that though I didn't *feel* union with him, I was brought to a moment - a short, tearstained, car trip albeit - of prayer.

Today? Maybe that was the point. Maybe that was enough.

Reflection 13:

For week 4 of Advent (The Week of Love)

I was introduced to the idea of "Even If" or "Even So" Faith in Louie Giglio's book Don't Let the Enemy Have a Seat At Your Table. (Great book, by the way!) He talks about having a faith in God that is not conditional. "Even if I suffer my whole life, I will praise you." "Even if you don't heal me, I will trust you." "Even if you don't bring me the man of my dreams, I will love you." "Even if this small life is all you've called me to, I will praise you."

The formula is simple. You list what you desire. **"Even if _____(what I desire and I ask of you)__"**
Then, you make a firm resolution to love God. "I will _____(the resolution to love God)_____."

For me?

Even if I am never a published author or a successful businesswoman or I get to speak on stage again, I will praise you. Even if I have a really hard birth and postpartum like I'm afraid of, I will praise you. Even if I feel hidden and alone in my stay-at-home-motherhood, I will praise you.

Yeesh, I don't like writing them out. I don't like exposing myself, because it shows that I **have** been loving God conditionally. I have been acting as if my dreams, desires, preferences, hopes, prayers, and requests should be part of the equation of my obedience and love for him. It's easy to love a God who I feel 'on the same page with'. Oh, I can see what he's doing? I can approve. Oh, I'm in a hard season? Well, I can see the fruit. I know what he's working on in my heart? I will endure.

He's a Good God. *That doesn't mean I'm entitled to understand why he's allowing me to suffer and be poor.*

Even if I never understand, will I praise him?
Or will I only praise him, love him, and honor him if I can see his intention?

You know, Jesus seems to have a consistent love language in the Gospels. Throughout the whole Bible, sure, but especially in the Gospels when we hear him speak and see him humanly react, one thing is clear: Jesus loves faith. He ***is honored*** and ***touched*** by faith.

When the centurion didn't even need Jesus to come to his home to heal his kid, Jesus marvels and says, "Never in Israel have I seen such faith." When the Canaanite woman pressed in and asked for healing for her child, Jesus is amazed and says, "Woman, great is your faith." When Thomas his apostle doubted his Resurrection, Jesus says to Thomas, "You have believed because you have seen me." Then he adds longingly, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Faith in him makes me work miracles. Faith in him seems to move his heart. He notices the widow who puts in the two coins, because her generosity out of her poverty is great. He notices when people believe from a place of poverty, not from a place of evidence.

You know what poverty gives us?

The opportunity to love God.

This week of Advent is the week of Love. Yes, primarily I'm sure it's about God's love for us. God comes to us in the ultimate act of love. But we get to return love to our Maker. *On this side of Heaven* as the saying goes, we have opportunity to love God in a unique way: through faith. When we do not see it or feel it or understand it, we can choose to praise and love him anyways.

This Side of Heaven by Seph Schlueter is a really beautiful reflection on this.

In our final week of Advent, as we approach the King in our poverty, let's keep this in mind. This encouraging, hopeful thought: that in our poverty, we have a gift to give the King. The poverty itself presents an occasion for faith. We can love him by faith, not be sight. We can love him when we feel poor, desolate, discouraged, weak, and far from him.

Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,

and ransom captive Israel

that mourns in lonely exile here

until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

shall come to you, O Israel.

Reflection 14:

For week 4 of Advent (The Week of Love)

We have to spend a moment on Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel, the Advent song of anticipation. This is a song of acknowledging our poverty. We cannot skip it and move straight to our Christmas Carols (though trust me, I like listening to Christmas music early). We have to pause on it.

Typically, Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuel is sung in a darkened dinner table as the Advent candles are lit. It represents the darkness of the world, and the light of Christ coming. The Advent wreath gets brighter every week as another flame is added, and every night, we sing again, *Come Jesus Come!*

My little brother used to sing to the right tune these words: *Oh comey, comey, comey, comey, comey.* It used to make us laugh, but I really like it. Childlike and simple. An invitation to the Lord. Come, come, come, come, come!

I don't typically send invitation texts with a frantic urge to them. Usually they're set up nicely, like, 'Oh hey, want to come over? And if not no pressure. In fact, if you hate me, I totally get it. Let me know if you never want to see me again. Okay, or just let me know what time you'll be here. Hope I didn't bother you! Xo!' (I'm kidding.) (But a little serious.)

This song? None of that decency stuff. No manners. It's a begging song, not an invitation. It's not polite.

Oh COME and RANSOM us.

I like to add my name.
Oh COME oh COME Emmanuel! A*nd ransom captive MONICA who mourns in lonely exile here.*

Come, Jesus into my poverty. I need you. I need you every moment. I am truly mourning in lonely exile, and it's from this place of need that my invitation comes. I don't have a casual, "Hey Jesus if you're around, I'd love to see you!" prayer. I have a, "Lord, you are the only way I'm going to make it" prayer. That's a gift poverty gives me. Self-sufficiency? Gone. Sense of pride in my own capabilities? Diminished. Desire to maintain a casual non-burdening relationship with God? Disappeared. I'll be like Hannah in the Old Testament, crying at the temple, looking foolish, and begging God, "COME."

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to captive Monica.

The song's promise of hope means so much more when I actually want it. In seasons of feeling at peace and joy and abundance, I haven't prayed this prayer as hard. I've thought it's beautiful and profound. Now, I think it's necessary and real.

The last few lines of Revelation (the last book of the Bible) are, "Come Lord Jesus!" (And then John concludes his letter with a nice ending.)

Maranatha, is the Hebrew.

Come Lord Jesus!

The whole Bible, by the way, is the story of God coming to save. It starts in Genesis, where humanity falls. And the whole 73-book story is about how God plays out salvation history. The characters and hurdles and covenants and plot twists and crazy Old Testament names - they're all part of God coming to save. Yet, here at the end of it all, in Revelation, the cry is the same: COME LORD JESUS.

You know what that tells me? Poverty is not just mine or yours. Poverty is ours. Poverty is the posture of fallen but redeemed mankind. We are imperfect, broken, poor, and suffering. And we need Jesus. We need to constantly be reminded in this you-got-this-girl world that we need Jesus.

Poverty tells us that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves and insecure. Poverty tells us that we have nothing to give. But what if that empty space within us *is* the gift? That's the place where faith can grow. From that empty space within us, we can cultivate a garden. In our emptiness, God can fill us. We have no more wine? Good, that means we have empty shelf space for him to bring it. We have nothing? Good, that's a seat for him. We are not thriving? Dare I say it? Good.

I heard an analogy that has stayed with me to this day as I attend Mass and go up to receive the Eucharist in the communion line. If we approach God with a "full heart", or let's say a "full cup", then when we receive the Eucharist, there's no space for grace to go. It's already all filled up. The cup overflows, sure, but we can't have any more. But if we come up with an empty heart, an "empty cup", then God can fill it to the brim. The cup can represent many things, but I take it as self-sufficiency. If I approach the Eucharist with this, "I've got hit handled!" mentality, cup full to the brim of my own sense of confidence, I have no room for God to fill me. I've filled myself.

So in this season, I am poor? I am not thriving at all?

For once, perhaps, I have room for God to come and dwell among me, and instead of giving him a half-hearted commitment to be a good Christian, I will bring a rent hearts to him and say, "I am poor, and I need you." And he will say, "Good. Because I have come for you."

Conclusion

What I have found is that even sincere, truthful reflections and words cannot always give me comfort. Even at the end of thinking, agreeing, reflecting, and praying about the concept of poverty...**we can still just feel poor and unhappy.**

This prayer companion cannot fix your poverty. It may not even provide you comfort. You may be just as poor as you were to start. Trust me, I feel the same discouragement in my poverty at the end of writing this as at the beginning.

But to live in the truth is better to live in confusion.

Do not be confused by this darkness of poverty.

Here is the truth:

You are loved.
You are known.
You are chosen.
He is coming for you.

Merry Christmas, and I pray for you at the manger.