

The Stillness of Winter

Sacred Blessings of the Season



BARBARA MAHANY

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 Abingdon Press
Growing in Life, Serving in Faith

NASHVILLE

THE STILLNESS OF WINTER
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*December is God whispering,
Please. Come. Closer.
Discover abundance within.
Marvel at the gifts I've bestowed.*



December: Sacred Invitation

There is something about December, all right.

I call it a gift.

It might be my ancient Celtic roots, or maybe it's my monastic inclinations, but give me a gray day, a day shrouded in mist and peekaboo light. Give me a shadowed nook to slip into. And I wrap myself in the cloak of utter contentment.

It's dark all right, come December, month of the longest night, when minute by minute our dot on the globe is darkening.

Yet darkness to me is alluring; it calls me to turn inside, to be hushed, to pay attention.

Mine is a lonely outpost; December, most everyone else complains, is unbroken darkness.

The way I see it, though, maybe the *saddest* thing is, we've blinded ourselves to the darkness. Cut ourselves off from the God-given ebb and flow of darkness and light. It's poetry, the rise and the fall of incandescence and shadow. But, mostly, it's lost on us.

The truth is: darkness draws out our deep-down depths. Darkness is womb, is seed underground. Darkness is where birthing begins, incubator of unseen stirring, essential and fundamental growing.

The liturgical calendar, prescriptive in its wisdoms, lights the way: it gives us Advent, season of anticipation, of awaiting, of holding our breath for spectacular coming. Season of dappling the darkness with candled crescendo.

And therein is the sacred instruction for the month: make the light be from you. Deep within you.



Seize the month. Reclaim the days. Employ ardent counter-culturalism, and do not succumb.

December, I like to think, is when God cloaks the world—or at least the northern half of the globe—in what amounts to a prayer shawl. December's darkness invites us inward, the deepening spiral—paradoxical spiral—we deepen to ascend, we vault from new depths.



At nightfall in December, at that blessed in-between hour, when the last seeds of illumination are scattered, and the stars turn on—all at once as if the caretakers of wonder have flown through the heavens sparking the wicks—we too, huddled in our kitchens or circled round our dining room tables, we strike the match. We kindle the flame. We shatter darkness with all the light we can muster.

Here's a radical thought, for December or otherwise: live sacramentally—yes, always. But most emphatically in the month of December. To be sacramental is to lift even the most ordinary moments into Holiness. Weave the liturgical into the everyday.

December is invitation. December is God whispering, *Please. Come. Closer. Discover abundance within. Marvel at the gifts I've bestowed.* Listen for the pulsing questions within, the ones that beg—finally—to be asked, to be answered. Am I doing what I love? Am I living the life I was so meant to live? Am I savoring or simply slogging along?

December invites us to be our most radiant selves. And we find that radiance deep down in the heart of the darkness. The darkness, our chambered nautilus of prayer. The coiled depths to which we turn in silence, to await the still small voice that whispers the original love song. Chorus and refrain, inscribed by the One Who Breathed the First Breath: make room in your heart this blessed December, make room where the birthing begins.



December's Whisper

The December I am drawn to, the one that most emphatically, insistently, invites me in, is the one that beckons in whisper.

The apex of my counter-culturalism, perhaps, I take my month of longest night in slow sure sips. Timpani belongs to someone else. My December is one that calls for quiet.

Long stretches of hours in which the simmering on the stove, the ticking of the clock, the occasional squawk of the jay at the feeder, those are the preludes, the quarter notes and half notes that I take in.

There will come, I'm certain—because year after year it comes—the one annual carol I play over and over, cranking the dial till the house shakes, and I worry the next-door neighbor might come running to see if all is well.

I've spent the week preparing, whisking away autumnal vestige, ushering in soon-to-come winter. I've stockpiled seed in 20-pound sacks (several, so far), and vats of ice-melting pellets for the dawn when the ice comes. I've piled pumpkins and gourds in the old trough my squirrels and possums (and the occasional uninvited skunk) depend on, the autumn's feast now theirs for winter keeping. I've snipped boxwood and spruce, tucked branches of both into window boxes just below the ledges, where Jack Frost will soon anoint the panes. I've strung Italian star-lights around and through the posts of my picket fence. When the sun drops down, I won't be alone in the dark. There is twinkling at the edge of the yard, front and back. And a candle flickers atop the kitchen table.

It is all a part of the coiling in. The nautilus of deepening prayer.

The prayer that fills me most is the prayer that slowly and silently seeps to the tucked-away places, the ones that await the season of stillness, the places unlocked



by the smells and the bells of December:
pungent clove, star anise, hissing wick,
crackling log, twilight's first star and the
night's last ember at dawn.

It won't be long till somehow
I crank the oven, haul out the
canisters, bang my grandma's
old maple rolling pin against the
cutting board's edge. My coterie
of cookie cutters each play a role in their
own sugarplum suite.

One day this week I hauled a turkey
carcass from the fridge, and plunked
it in my deepest pot, the vessel for
soup-making for a dear, dear friend whose newborn is just home
from the ICU, and for whom I've cooked up all the sustenance
I could imagine: brown rice, pulled-from-the-earth plump knotty
carrots and fennel and garlic, savory stock, a handful of parsley.

I'll deliver my brew well before sundown, and in return I'll
drink in the newness, the perfection, of a babe just birthed,
cradled more tightly and tenderly than ever imagined because
ICUs do a mighty fine job of reminding how blessed it is to be
finally sent home, untethered from the web of too many tubes
and the fright that shakes a new mama and papa—and all those
who love them—down to their rickety bones.



(There is, of course, no ailment that the balm of a day-long simmering kettle won't cure; even a newborn mama's terrible tremble is certain to be chased away at the very first shlurp of that omnipotent zoup.)

Indeed, these are my December liturgies, day after day. Intercessions of prayer, punctuated by plain old worldly deadlines. I attend to my errands and chores and assignments—laundry is folded and ferried, empty shelves of the fridge re-stocked, sentences are typed and essays submitted.

But the work that's most heavenly, certainly, is the quiet work of the soul come December. The making way, making room at the inn, in the heart.

The grace of December, the gift of December, is in the quieting, the hush of the sacred whisper. The vespers that hallow—make holy—the heart. Make room in the heart this quiet December.

Smell, aka Simmering Wintry Incense

A rite of winter, a sort of home-spun incense that I call, simply, Smell. It fills the house (or at least the kitchen) with "winter," and the making of it each morning is almost sacramental.

I have an old small red pot and, once the chill of winter rolls in, I take to filling it each morning with spices and orange

peel, all doused in water, which I softly simmer through the day—whenever I'm home. My little red "smell" pot holds these ancient spices: star of anise, cinnamon stick, a small handful of cloves, a bay leaf, an orange peel from a bowl of dried peels nearby. The heavenly perfume that rises is one that soothes and stirs and reminds me Christmas is coming, these are the days for simmering stillness, for gathering the gifts of the earth and sending them heavenward. Little puffs of prayer cloud.

It's soul food, indeed. Deep-breathed, fuel for the soul . . .

Should you be inclined to stir up a batch of your very own "Smell": gather 1 whole star anise (from any spice shop); 1 cinnamon stick; a palmful of cloves (let's say 6); 1 or 2 bay leaves; the peel of 1 orange or clementine.

Plop into a small cookpot. Cover with water. Set to simmering on the stove. Inhale to your heart and soul's content.





Counting the Days

I am practicing Advent. Really practicing. Paying attention. Giving in to the season in ways that wash over me, seep into me, bring me back home to a place I may never have been.

Like a child this year, I have a just-opened sense of these days.

I am, for the very first time, not counting down. Not ticking off days and errands to run like a clock wound too tightly.

Instead, I am counting in a whole other way. I am counting, yes, but the thing that I'm doing is making count each one of the days. I am counting the days in a way that takes time. That takes it and holds it. Savors it. Sucks out the marrow of each blessed hour.

I am this year embracing the darkness. I am kindling lights. I am practicing quiet. I am shutting out noise and filling my house with the sounds of the season that call me.

I am practicing no. No is the word that I'm saying to much of the madness. No, I cannot go there. No, I cannot race from one end of town to the other. No, I will not.

I am practicing yes.

Yes, I will wake up early. Will tiptoe alone, and in quiet, to down in the kitchen, and out to the place where the moon shines. Where the early bird hasn't yet risen. But I have. I am alone with the dark and the calm, and I am standing there watching the shadows, the lace of the moon. I am listening for words that fill up my heart. It's a prayer and it comes to me, fills my lungs, as I breathe in cold air, the air of December, December's most blessed breath.

Yes, I am redressing my house. I am tucking pinecones and berries of



red, in places that not long ago were spilling with pumpkins and walnuts and acorns.

I am waking up to the notion that to usher the season into my house is to awaken the sacred. It is to shake off the dust of the days just before. To grope for the glimmer amid all the darkness.

December, more than most any month, can go one of two ways.

One trail is all tangled, all covered with bramble. You can get lost, what with all of the noise and all of the bright colored lights.



But December, if you choose, if you allow it, can be the trail through the woods that leads to the light, far off in the distance.

The darkness itself offers the gift. Each day, the darkness comes sooner, comes deeper, comes blacker than ink. It draws us in, into our homes, yes, but more so, into our souls.

It invites us: light a light. Wrap a blanket. Sit by the fire. Stare into the flames, and onto the last dying embers. Consider the coming of Christmas.

I am, in this month of preparing, in this month of a story told time and again, listening anew to the words. I am considering the story of the travelers, the Virgin with Child, the donkey, the man with the tools, the unlikely trio, knocking and knocking at door after door.

I am remembering how, long, long ago, I winced when I heard how no one had room. Open the door, I would shout deep inside. Make room. Make a room.

I didn't know then I could change it. I could take hold of the story; make it be just as it should be.

But I do now. I know now.

I am taking hold of that story, the way that it's told this December. I am, in the dark and the quiet, making the room that I longed for. For the three in the story, yes, but even for me.

I am preparing a room at the inn. The inn, of course, is my heart.



It's the Quietest Moments that Speak to Me...

The shoes of the boys I love, the shoes I've always filled before dawn on the sixth of December, the Feast of St. Nick, those shoes are hundreds of miles away this dawn. Likely lined up like straight-back soldiers in one's law-school apartment, and in a dorm room half as far away, I'm guessing they're jumbled, strewn under a desk or a bed, or a sweatshirt and socks heaped on the floor.

To grow up in this old house was to wake up to foil-wrapped chocolates and oranges and surely a candy cane stuffed in the wide-open maw of your boot or your slipper or sneakers, a pair that grew by the year (all the more room for more chocolates), and always was left by the bedroom door on the night of the fifth.

I've always made as much of a folderol over this "Little Christmas" as I have over the one that's gotten so noisy.

It's the quiet moments of Christmas, the unexpected kindnesses, the silence on a star-stitched night that stir the holy in me. I enter into the season in whispers. Find myself pulled into tide pools of unspoken wonder. Thrill like a kid with her nose pressed to the windowpane when I find myself face to face with the modern-day version of an elf. If you keep watch, and I'd advise that you do, there are jolly fine elves all around.

This time of year, I do make a list. A list of out-of-the-blue elves and dollops of kindness that have plopped into my lap:

- ✿ The gas station owner who piled his tools into a cardboard box and drove me the three blocks to where my own car wouldn't start, where he proceeded to ping and tap-tap-tap to try to get the key in the ignition to turn (it would not). He charged not a penny and did the whole thing with a serious smile and multiple insistences that this was not at all out of his way. (On a Sunday morning no less.)

- ✿ The college roommate from long, long ago who sent me a shoebox bursting with the itty-bittiest gingerbread babies, each one iced and strewn with cinnamon hearts, each one dangling from a skinny red thread she'd taken the time to tie in a loop.
- ✿ My brother who's driving two hours (each way) to the snow-covered storybook village where our freshman in college is just about to start his first round of finals. The plan (hatched in the spontaneous joy of the moment) is to fetch the kid after his last exam, bring him back to Cleveland for a Friday night's feast and a snooze on an airbed, then tuck him onto a Greyhound bus for the long ride home, where he'll finish his papers in the cozy quiet of home.

My list isn't done; it's just getting started. But I know from years and years of paying attention that those catch-you-by-surprise, take-your-breath-away moments are the ones when the Christmas seeps in.

It's something like watching water whirl down a drain; it's a force you can't stop, it's a pull you can't really see. But you feel it. You know it. The moment sucks you right in, a sinkhole of joy, of wonder, of can-you-believe-such-kindness-exists? And suddenly, deep down inside, you're inside a snow globe of heaven on earth.

Christmas comes in certain spoonfuls, best swallowed all along the way, through the quiet you carve out of the noise. By the time the day itself arrives, you'll have savored its coming already.

Merry Christmas-Is-Coming, St. Nick is among us.

Inscribe your own list of caught-by-surprise Christmas kind-nesses here, the ones that might otherwise go unnoticed, unheralded (and be sure to share with those kind-hearted elves who melted you in the first place) . . .

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