

HANNAH ANDERSON

HEAVEN
and
NATURE
SING



25 Advent Reflections
to Bring Joy to the World

ILLUSTRATIONS *by* NATHAN ANDERSON

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For Naomi Ruth Detandt (1970–2021), who honored
Christmas in her heart and tried to keep it all the year long.

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Author's Note

This book contains twenty-five essays designed to carry you through the weeks before Christmas. Commonly known as Advent, these weeks mark the start of the church year and have historically been a time for reflection, fasting, and prayer focused on the second coming of Jesus, not necessarily his first. In fact, in some church traditions, Christmas decorations and celebrations are held off until Christmas Day in much the same way that Lent does not end until Easter morning.

Today, however, Advent is more often observed as a kind of “soft opening” for Christmas. Most of us know the season because of Advent calendars that help us count down the days with little treats or activities. This approach to Advent leads us to Christmas, not by deprivation but by invitation, giving us a sneak peek of what’s coming.

With this book, I hope to split the difference, giving you a chance to prepare your heart for Christmas by considering both why Jesus came to earth in the first place and why we so desperately long for his return. I want to offer you hope—not by ignoring the brokenness but by looking it squarely in the face, knowing that your Redeemer has and will come. And I

want to tell that story through the lens of the natural world, to consider how not just we, but *all of creation*, waits for our Creator King.

I was originally inspired in this direction by Isaac Watts's 1719 hymn "Joy to the World." Although we know it as a Christmas carol, it was written as an Advent hymn because it looks forward to the day when Jesus will reign and the world will finally be at peace. Of course, it's impossible to separate the first and second comings. The Son who came is the Son who will come, and our need of him today is no less than it's ever been or ever will be.

So, how should you read this book?

If you did not grow up with traditional rhythms of Advent, you may find such habits difficult to keep consistently. Because of this, let me invite you to read these reflections with the month of December as a guide. Simply begin on December 1 and reward yourself with a chocolate with each reading. The twenty-five meditations will carry you through to Christmas Day.

If, however, you prefer to follow the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, you may read each section (marked by the headings Hope, Faith, Joy, and Peace) in coordination with the four weeks of Advent. This should deliver you to Christmas Day in an orderly fashion as well.

But perhaps your approach to the days before Christmas is more like mine. If so, feel free to begin this book with the best of intentions, get busy with holiday preparations, lose it among the gift wrap, find it two weeks later, and binge several readings in one sitting to catch up. This, too, will deliver you to Christmas, as I have never known the day to wait until I was ready for it.

In any case, may the grace that first brought the Son of God to earth carry you through these next few weeks. May

you discover afresh his kindness and goodness. May you long for his kingdom to come, and may you find yourself singing his praise with all creation.



Wintering

Here, where I live in the mountains of southwest Virginia, December marks the beginning of winter. Night gathers quickly, with a deep darkness settling in by the time we settle around the table. The ground, that only a few months earlier burst with life, lies dormant under a chill that never seems to lift. From the warmth of my kitchen, I look out the window to see my once-lush garden encrusted with ice, full of thick, heavy clods of earth, and littered with the remnants of corn-stalk and pumpkin vine that twist up among the table scraps.

The red raspberry canes stand bare, imitating dead sticks quite believably. The strawberry plot has been rifled for the last bits of fruit, and all that remains are dark, decaying leaves. The herbs have been cut back to their slumbering roots. And on particularly cold mornings, the asparagus I left to bolt is encased in frost, its fern-like leaves crystallized so that each segment is clearly visible.

Closer to the house, ornamental beds of lily, hosta, and peony hide their delicate parts deep within the earth. The grape vine that climbed the arbor in summer and whose clusters hung over us while we ate and drank in the sun is bare, stripped and cut back in expectation of next season. The peach trees raise bony limbs against a perpetual gray sky. And across the way, the fields lay in patchwork browns, punctuated occasionally by tussocks of rusty broom sedge. I can see straight through the thicket of trees now, their naked trunks and leafless branches as thin as wisps of hair on an aging head.

In December, it's hard to believe that the earth ever brought forth life or that it ever will again.

But winter also brings the holidays, and so we do our best to be merry despite the landscape around us. We wrap bare limbs and sleeping bushes in brightly colored lights, the miracle of electricity compensating for their previous buds and blooms. We stoke fires to make up for the sun's absence and fuel them with seasoned wood, disproportionately pleased by our ability to salvage light and heat from death. The wintering birds will get an extra helping of seed, and eventually, we'll cut a tree and drag it into the front room. We'll scour the woods for bits of green—Virginia pine, holly, eastern hemlock, and if we're lucky, mistletoe—and drape them along the mantle, windowsills, doorways, and banisters.

I wonder, though, if we're really scouring for hope, searching for those small, steady promises that reassure us that the gathering night and the present interlude is only temporary. I wonder if, like the earth itself, we're waiting, holding our breath in anticipation, longing to believe that something more is happening, that something more is coming. I wonder if we're all just waiting for God to show up.

In Romans 8, the apostle Paul writes that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us”—that no matter what we're currently going through, no matter the heartbreak, no matter the confusion, no matter the grief or loss, God's goodness and glory await us. That deep, under the surface, out of sight, he is at work. That he always has been, and he always will be. To prove this, Paul turns our attention to the natural world:

For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility—not

willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children.¹

It’s a strange thing to think of the earth this way—as having a will or having to wait or even having the ability to hope for redemption. Even stranger that the earth would be our partner in hope, longing for freedom and life and glory as much as we do.

But when I look out my window in December, when I see how much the world around me has changed in only a few weeks, when I see its lifeless stillness, I believe it. And when I remember what Genesis tells me—that I was made from that same ice-encrusted earth, that a curse of futility hangs over us both, that “from dust you were taken and to dust you will return”²—I know it in my bones.

Yes, the heavens declare the glory of God, and the earth shows forth his handiwork just as Psalm 19 says they do. And yes, when I gaze into the inky blackness of a December night and see a thousand points of light, I can almost hear a chorus of praise. But when I see a mountaintop cut bare for the minerals beneath or I remember the whirlwinds that level neighborhoods or I watch on the news as fires consume home and forest alike, I hear something else. I hear a groaning that mirrors my own. I hear a longing and a pain that cries out for redemption.

And I find in nature an unexpected ally in the work of hope.

So in this season, as we celebrate the Creator who took on flesh and came to his creation, we do so in solidarity with an entire cosmos. Here in these moments of Advent and Nativity, heaven and nature sing, teaching a truth we cannot

know without the witness of both. It is a story of bodies and skies and beasts and trees—all waiting for the glory that will be revealed when the Son of God comes to his own. It is a story of longing and incarnation, of the earth receiving a flesh-and-blood Redeemer, first as a Baby and one day forever as its King.

I want to invite you into this story afresh. To consider the Christmas narrative from a slightly different perspective—to think of all the ways Jesus’s coming changed and will change the world. To truly believe that in response to the Savior’s reign, “fields and floods/Rocks, hills and plains/Repeat the sounding joy.”³

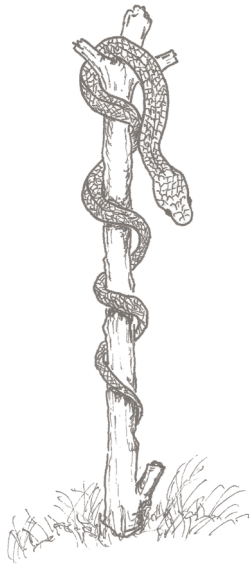
For as much as we are part of this same creation, made from the very ground that lies beneath our feet, it is our story as well. So that even as our mortal bodies waste away and the ground continues to groan, we take hope. The One who loved the world came to it. And from this love, he will redeem it until both the earth and those made from it slip from the bondage of decay to eternal glory. Until the children of God are revealed.

Because just as Jesus came to this world through birth, the Scripture promises that we enter the heavenly kingdom through rebirth and that one day the earth itself will give birth—not just to another season, but to our resurrected bodies.

And now you know why heaven and nature sing. Now you know why those of us who dwell in the dust must awake and sing along with them, why a chorus of “joy to the world” is on our lips. Here in this season, with its quiet, pervasive witness to both life and death, when we’re most fully aware of the darkness can we become most fully aware of the light. Here our cries for deliverance become songs of praise. And here,

between what is and what will be, I am most convinced of the glory that must come.

Because here, where Advent turns to Nativity, creation itself teaches us to hope in our Creator, infant King.



The Serpent

Kill it again, Charles! Kill it again!” I’d heard the punch line a dozen times, but it never failed to send me into a fit of giggles. That my grandma, the strongest, bravest woman I knew, would be the source of it made it even funnier.

She’d grown up in the mountains during the Great Depression, the middle child of ten. Her people were farmers who understood the goodness of hard work, laughter, and family, so once a year, we’d make our way back to their hills for a reunion where the siblings swapped memories and told tales on one another. I remember passels of cousins by varying degrees, games of softball, an outhouse, a creek, and tables full of food—potato salad, ham, and butterscotch pie.

But my favorite time for stories was curled up in my grandma’s bed on the nights I was allowed to stay over. Our days together were for work—cleaning, blackberry picking, and gardening—but the nights were for storytelling. She’d dress me in layers and socks and tuck me in under piles of blankets. Sweating, I’d throw them off, but she’d put them right back on, determined that I wouldn’t be cold.

Then in the darkness, I’d whisper, “Grandma, tell me about the time . . .”

I had a whole repertoire of stories to choose from: the time she’d overturned the churn and spilled the family’s cream for the week or how she walked three miles to high school in good weather and boarded in town in bad. But one of my favorite

stories was when she and her older brothers were out making hay under a blazing summer sun.

She'd been assigned to the top of the wagon, and as her brothers threw up pitchforks of hay, she'd stamp them down to make room for more. The system was working fine until a tremendous black snake came flying through the air straight at her—an unfortunate hitchhiker on someone's fork of hay. As quickly as it had come up, she sent it back down, where her brother stabbed it. But satisfied with nothing less than the reptile's eternal damnation, she screamed, "Kill it again, Charles! Kill it again!"

In all fairness to the snake, seeing one in a hay field isn't uncommon, and most are entirely harmless. There's the black racer—long, shiny, darting here and there; the northern ring-necked with its yellow collar; and the eastern garter, a striped snake that apparently to someone, somewhere, once resembled the aforementioned accessory. You will occasionally spot more harmful snakes, the kind that send a shiver up your spine and have earned the aversion we carry against the species as a whole. Timber rattlers make their home in wooded areas, blending into the underbrush, while their neighbor the copperhead prefers more open habitats like overgrown fields, dilapidated barns, and rock ledges.

When you encounter a snake, however, the best thing to do is nothing. Even a venomous snake would rather move along than bite you. So catch your breath, calm your heart, and watch it for a few seconds before it glides out of sight. If you do, you'll see one of the most unexpected, and unnerving, spectacles in the animal kingdom.

Limbless, a snake propels itself in waves, writhing and slithering along the ground. To climb, it will coil around a tree or pole, scrunching and creeping upward. To burrow, it relies on "rectilinear locomotion," a unique coordination of scale and

muscle movements that allow it to push its body forward in a straight line. Surprisingly, this uncanny way of getting around is the first specific animal phenomenon recorded in Scripture. And perhaps even more surprisingly, the snake is the first to receive the promise of Christmas.

According to Genesis, after God made the man and woman, he placed them in a garden which they shared with the animals. For a while, everything was good and beautiful and exactly as God planned; but a twist was coming, a twist in the form a winding, coiling, curling reptile. One day a snake shows up, and with subtle, hissing words, convinces them to do the one thing God had forbidden: to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Immediately, a curse descends; the man and woman are banished from the garden; and nothing is the same again.

For its part in the deceit, God sentences the snake to its unique movement:

You are cursed more than any livestock
and more than any wild animal.
You will move on your belly
and eat dust all the days of your life.

But then he promises this:

I will put hostility between you and the
woman,
and between your offspring and her
offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.¹

Theologians call this passage the *protevangelium*, or the first announcement of the good news, because it foreshadows the birth of the One who will undo the serpent's deceit along

with its lethal aftermath. Eve's hope—our hope—was that this coming Promised Son would crush the serpent and all it represents, even as he suffers in the process.

But here's something curious: the news of a Redeemer wasn't given to Eve, not directly at least. It was given to the snake. And it was given in the form of a warning: judgment is coming. The power you hold over the earth will one day be taken from you. So for the snake, Christmas is far from good news. Or is it?

Of course, the snake of Genesis 3 is not simply a snake, not like the ring-necked and garter snakes in my backyard. Revelation 12:9 speaks of an "ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the one who deceives the whole world." And elsewhere in Scripture, snakes represent sin and our own bent toward falsehood. Romans 3, for example, says

There is no one who does what is good,
not even one.
Their throat is an open grave;
they deceive with their tongues.
Vipers' venom is under their lips.²

In this sense, we are also the hissing, deceitful ones. We, too, creep and crawl along the earthly plane. We, too, face certain judgment.

But here's something even more unexpected than the fact that Christmas was first announced to a reptile. In John 3, Jesus likens his redemptive work to a miracle that occurred centuries earlier when God healed the Israelites of poisonous snakebites by having them look to a bronze serpent on a pole. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness," Jesus says, "so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."³

And just like that, those who once followed the snake into damnation, now proclaim the grace of Christ in salvation. Those cursed by their own disobedience are now blessed by the obedience of another. I wonder about this. I wonder how the snake—so long associated with sin and death—could be associated with Christmas. I wonder until I remember the heart of the Creator for his creation. The God who knows every sparrow that falls, who numbers the stars, who holds the seas in his hand—would this same God let his creation be taken from him? Would he so easily give up what he has created and called “good”?

No. This is a God who redeems. This is a God who restores—both for those who have suffered under the deceit of sin and those who have deceived others. Because one day, evil will be crushed under the heel of the Promised Son, and his blessings will flow “far as the curse is found.”⁴

And when he does, the snake that was once a sign of sin’s dominion will become a sign of our complete and final redemption. In Isaiah 11:8–9, the prophet tells us of the day when the Promised Son will finally and fully reign over his creation. In that day,

an infant will play beside the cobra’s pit,
and a toddler will put his hand into a snake’s
den.

They will not harm or destroy each other
on my entire holy mountain.

The hope of the snake is our hope. We, who with poison on our lips have deceived and been deceived, to us, the promise is given: a Savior has come, and a Savior will come. And when he is lifted up, all who look to him will find life—everlasting and eternal.



“Joy to the world—the Lord has come!”



We sing these words every year, but what does it mean that the Creator came to his creation as a baby? How exactly does the “earth receive her King”?

What does it sound like when rocks, hills, floods, and plains echo his praise? And what would it mean for you to join in the chorus?

Through 25 Advent meditations written by Hannah Anderson (accompanied by Nathan Anderson’s distinctive artwork), you are invited into a fresh reading of the Christmas story—one where earthy, overlooked things like snowflakes, trees, serpents, bodies, and swaddling bands reveal the glory of the Promised Son. As you walk through *Heaven and Nature Sing*, journeying from the first pages of Scripture to the last, you’ll experience the goodness of our Creator King and learn how the whole earth sings his praise.



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