



THE *Inspired Prayer* JOURNAL ADVENT EDITION

An Advent reflection on creativity and
sharing your soul with the world around you



by Kristen A. Wheeler





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“

MY LONGING FOR TRUTH
WAS A SINGLE PRAYER.

EDITH STEIN

“

FOR ME, PRAYER IS A SURGE OF THE
HEART; IT IS A SIMPLE LOOK TURNED
TOWARD HEAVEN, IT IS A CRY OF
RECOGNITION AND OF LOVE,
EMBRACING BOTH TRIAL AND JOY.

THERESE OF LISIEUX





“

TO THE SERVANT OF
GOD, EVERY PLACE IS
THE RIGHT PLACE, AND
EVERY TIME IS THE
RIGHT TIME.

CATHERINE OF SIENA

“

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY AS IF YOU
WERE GOING TO LIVE FOREVER, AND
TAKE CARE OF YOUR SOUL AS IF YOU
WERE GOING TO DIE TOMORROW.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO



“



PRAY, EVEN IF YOU FEEL
NOTHING, SEE NOTHING.
FOR WHEN YOU ARE DRY,
EMPTY, SICK, OR WEAK, AT
SUCH A TIME IS YOUR
PRAYER MOST PLEASING TO
GOD, EVEN THOUGH YOU
MAY FIND LITTLE JOY IN IT.
THIS IS TRUE OF ALL
BELIEVING PRAYER.

JULIAN OF NORWICH

“

WE CANNOT LIVE IN A
WORLD THAT IS NOT OUR
OWN, IN A WORLD THAT IS
INTERPRETED FOR US BY
OTHERS. AN INTERPRETED
WORLD IS NOT A HOME. PART
OF THE TERROR IS TO TAKE
BACK OUR OWN LISTENING,
TO USE OUR OWN VOICE, TO
SEE OUR OWN LIGHT.

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN



AN ADVENT REFLECTION

According to my chocolate Advent calendar, it's three days until Christmas: *The Art of Busy*.

When I was running my photography business in Florida, I used to relish in “being busy.” Being busy meant work and money were coming in; long nights editing images at my computer, keeping up with clients, and being present on social media and important events had all been fruitful. But one thing I never saw until I gave up that business when I moved to Louisiana was that I had to say “no” a lot. I was saying “no” to outings with friends, to events I wanted to be a part of, to celebrations and road trips, even to time on the couch with my husband, all because I was just too busy with my work. Soon, I noticed a lot less invitation and a lot more “I-know-you’re-busy-but’s.”

Once I settled into Southern Louisiana where everything moves as slow as molasses, where invitations are given freely and meant with the sincerest of hearts, where people show up at your front door without notice carrying a bag of po’ boys and sweet potato fries, a smile, and a “just passing through and thought I would say hello”, I realized everything I missed out on when I was caught up in what I like to call “the art of busy.” My whole world decelerated, and because of that I found a church family and a call I never knew I had.

Advent is a time of preparation, a time of slowing down before the joys and hustle and bustle of the Christmas season. I don’t want you to get caught up in your own “art of busy” and forget to make room in your own lives’ friends. You have to say “no” to the less important things more often so you can leave room for the “yes” to the super important ones. Say “no” to large gatherings, so you can say “yes” to lighting the candles on your advent wreath with your family every night. Say “no” to busy shopping trips, so you can say “yes” to watching Hallmark Christmas movies with your friends or spending more time with your partner.

It's hard to envision more slowing down when we're still reeling from the effects of the pandemic and when most of us spent Thanksgiving with a lot less people at the table the last couple years. But we must learn to find the joy and anticipation independent of our circumstances. What if Jesus showed up at your house unannounced right now with po' boys and sweet potato fries? Would there be room for him at the table? Would you be so caught up in being busy and worrying about your own life that you'd ignore or not even hear the knock at the door? What if I told you that saying "no" more gives Jesus space in our lives? Exercise the "no." More importantly, give yourself permission to say "no."

My hope is that this Inspired Prayer Journal will help you say "yes" to the things that matter most and pave a way for spending more time with Jesus, for opening the proverbial door to him, for spending more time with yourself in preparation for the holiday season. You don't need to be a creative-minded person to participate in this exercise of prayer, the creative thought is here for you, open to interpretation, open to your own exploration of faith and prayer.

"For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

— Mark 13:35

WHAT IS PRAYER?

Do you Pray?



I loved this interpretation of Prayer.
What is a prayer? Prayer doesn't just happen when we kneel or put our hands together and focus and expect things from God. Thinking positive and wishing good for others is a prayer. When you hug a friend. That's a prayer. When you cook something to nourish family and friends. That's a prayer. When we send off our near and dear ones and say, 'drive safely' or 'be safe'. That's a prayer. When you are helping someone in need by giving your time and energy. You are praying. When you forgive someone by your heart. *That is prayer. Prayer is a vibration. A feeling. A thought. Prayer is the voice of love, friendship, genuine relationships. Prayer is an expression of your silent being.
Keep praying always

What does prayer look like to you? When I was a little Catholic school girl, prayer looked a lot like getting on my knees in front of my bed, or on my knees in church, or asking for forgiveness in front of a priest at confession. Looking back on my childhood experience, while this may not be everyone's experience, prayer seemed a lot like punishment. "I fought with my brother today," "ok, go say two Hail Mary's and an Our Father." Prayer also looked a lot like "Dear God, so what happened today was . . ." But the thing is, God already knows what happened today, God was there. It wasn't until just a

few years ago that I realized there are other ways of praying that I have been doing all along. It was like I needed permission to pray a different way. I guess that's what happens with all that guilt.

I learned that prayer can look like a painting, or a piece of creative writing. Prayer can also look like a "thank you," a "please," or a "how are you today?" But mostly what I learned is that God just wants to talk to you in casual conversation, in the small moments and words of your day, whenever and wherever that might be. Most of us have been doing this our whole lives, but just call it a conversation and not a "formal" prayer.

I hope this journal helps you think of prayer in new and exciting ways. And in case you need permission: ALL OF THIS IS PRAYER. Reading is prayer. Writing is prayer. Drawing is prayer. Eating together is prayer. Reflection is prayer. But most of all, YOU are a prayer.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

WEEK ONE

“The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer



I once heard an Epiphany sermon that said the three wisemen cried at the sight of Jesus; not because he was born, but because they knew he would die, as they foresaw the future of his life and pending death. The story of the wisemen struck me differently from that point forward and reminded me what Advent is about. . .preparation. We are preparing for the coming of Jesus, nesting if you will. But we are also solemn in the fact that Jesus' birth also means Jesus' inevitable and heartbreaking death. This coincidentally helped me understand and accept my seasonal depression a little more. I am certainly not telling you that you should dwell in that, what I am telling you is that it's okay for you to be sad if that's what you need to feel right now. A lot of people experience loss this time of year, maybe this is a helpful way for you to recognize and work through it.

As we move into the first week of Advent, I invite you to study more about the meaning of the season and why we celebrate it in the church. Maybe answering the question of why solemn prayer is so particularly fitting for this time before Christmas, whether that's for you personally, or as a whole.

So, let's take this time to talk about writing our own prayers. Research and/or reflect on poems and prayers that bring you great comfort, remembering that they don't have to be written by clergy or some significant religious or holy person. Maybe you find poems or prayers that acknowledge the sad parts of you right now, that's equally important too. Prayerful reflections can be found just about anywhere, maybe even in a

fiction novel. Now, follow the activity below and let's write our own prayers together.

A prayer for the beginning of Advent
written by Kristen A. Wheeler

Mother God, Father Spirit, Child of Creation, may we take this time in preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ as an opportunity and invitation to pray in new and unique ways. Help us hear your calming voice, feel your warm touch upon our hearts, speak softly to our own souls, take the time in tasting the sweetness of bread we share at our own tables, and see the child of creation, our Lord Jesus Christ, in and through others, especially those people and circumstances we usually avoid. Help us to say “no” to the things that distract us and say “yes” to the things that fill our spirit. Prepare our hearts and the hearts of others this Advent season and remind us of your presence each day, in every small moment and every precious gesture. In our sadness and in our joys, you are our dwelling, our strength, and our courage. Amen.

Activity: Sit quietly and meditate on prayer; your pre-conceived notions of prayer and what prayer looks like to you. Talk to God in casual conversation about the coming birth of Jesus and what that might look like to God and to you. Now let's take some time and thought and write your own Advent prayer. What came up for you during this conversation with God? In your prayer, reflect on the preparation of Advent and what that looks like in your world. Use the bible verses on the following pages for reflection if you feel so called.

BIBLE VERSES

John 1:9

“The true light that gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”

Isaiah 7:14

“Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.”

Numbers 24:17

“I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites.”

1 Peter 1:19-20

“But with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb. 20 He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was revealed in these last times for you.”

John 7:42

“Doesn’t the Scripture say that the Messiah comes from David’s offspring and from the town of Bethlehem, where David lived?”

John 1:10-13

“He was in the world, and the world was created through him, and yet the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name, 13 who were

born, not of natural descent, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God.”

John 1:14

“*T*he Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Luke 1:26-38

“*I*n the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And the angel came to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. 30 Then the angel told her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.” 34 Mary asked the angel, “How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?” 35 The angel replied to her: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” said Mary. “May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.”

Luke 1:39-45

“*I*n those days Mary set out and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judah 40 where she entered Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Then she exclaimed with a loud cry: “Blessed are you among women, and your child will be blessed! 43 How could this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For you see, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby

leaped for joy inside me. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill what he has spoken to her!”

Matthew 1:22-23

“Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”

Luke 2:4-7

“Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, 5 to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

Matthew 2:1-2

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.”

Isaiah 9:6

“For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”

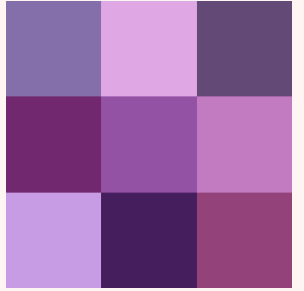
Activity: What word or phrase stands out to you the most in this collection of verses? I invite you to use some markers or whatever you have handy and draw the word or phrase. Write it out on a piece of paper really big and spend time doodling around it and filling it in with color. Remember, you don’t need to be an artist to doodle!

WEEK TWO



Advent includes the four Sundays and weekdays in-between leading up to Christmas. The Advent wreath is a longstanding tradition adopted by Christians during the Middle Ages as a spiritual preparation. The Advent wreath and candles are full of symbolism: evergreens, pinecones, holly, and other wintery greens signifying life, strength, resurrection, and healing; the circle shape signifying eternity and life everlasting; the candles signifying each week of the season. The candles represent a unique significance with their color: three of the candles are violet for the liturgical year signifying a time of prayer, penance, and sacrifice. The first violet candle we light on the first Sunday of Advent symbolizes hope and the anticipation of the coming Messiah. The second violet candle symbolizes faith and stands as a reminder of the Holy Family's pilgrimage to Bethlehem, the faith they carried out in trusting God with their lives. The third candle, the rose-colored candle, symbolizes joy, and is lit on Gaudete Sunday as a reminder of the joy we experience in Jesus' birth. The fourth candle, the final violet candle, symbolizes peace and reminds us of the Archangel's message "Peace on Earth, Good will toward Men." There is also a white candle (the color of purity) in the center of the wreath that we light on Christmas Eve, symbolizing the life of Christ.

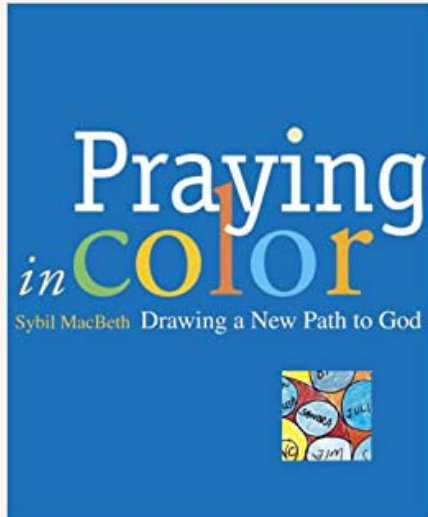




Activity: I invite you to meditate on the colors PURPLE and PINK. How do they appear to you? (If you need help, maybe find a purple or pink object in your house that you can focus on.) Are they bright and bold like a southern sunset? Are they soft and subtle like flower petals? Are they faded and transparent like colored glass? Describe the shades of purples and pinks in a picture. What does this mean for you? Where have you lived in your life in ways you can remember? What do you think of? How do these shades of purples and pinks affect your mood?

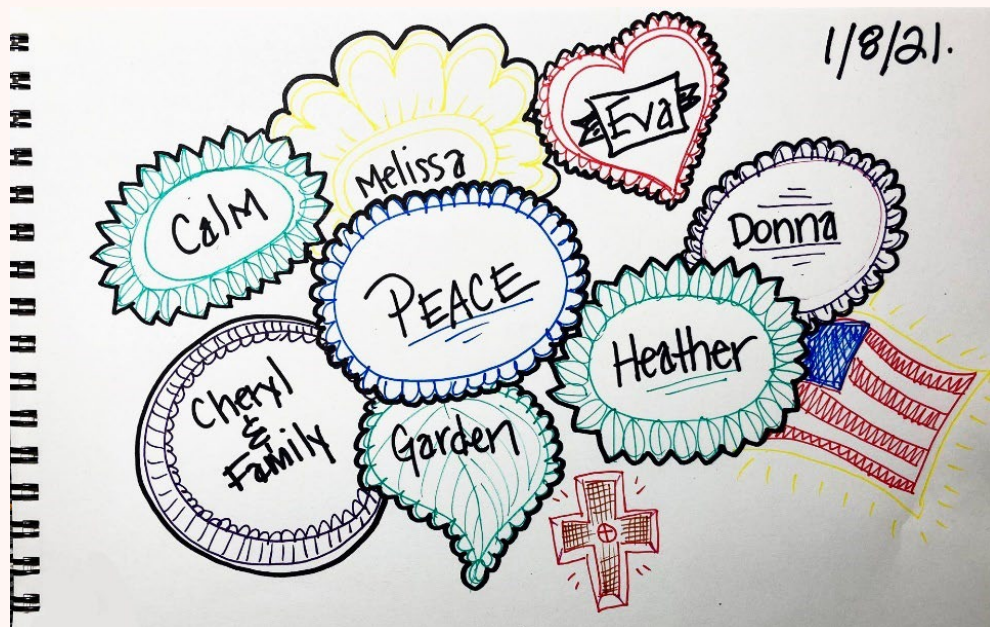
This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

PRAYING IN COLOR



Let's take this praying on color a step further and introduce you to a new way to pray creatively. One of my favorite ways to pray is *Praying in Color* (see book by Sybil Macbeth). It is a quiet but active prayer for those, like me, who find it hard to sit still and close your eyes. You can even start a creative prayer journal where you collect all your creative prayers in one place! Anyone can doodle; start by drawing some shapes on a piece of paper. Now write inside the shapes someone you are praying for or something you are praying about. You can

even add your Thanksgivings and God moments too. Once you have them all written down, now you can start doodling! The point is that as you are spending time drawing and writing, this is praying. When you concentrate on the words that are in that shape, you are actively praying. If you want to keep it super Advent-y, use only purple (violet), pink (rose), and white!



WEEK THREE



*L*et's take the Ignatius approach to this week's activity and creative prayer time, using all our senses to experience this Advent journey in a new way. What are some of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, and emotions that bring you into this Advent season in preparation for Christmas? You can even take a look back in this journal at the bible verses I shared with you, reflecting on them again, and go through your senses; what do you experience as a silent observer in these readings? This week, focus on all your senses to the season. As you're walking around the grocery store, or taking a walk in your neighborhood, or preparing in the kitchen, or visiting a friend. What do you smell? What do you taste? What do you see and hear? What do you feel on your skin and in your heart?

Activity: I invite you to meditate on your sensory experiences this week. Write them down, be descriptive, draw pictures of what you saw, listen to music that inspires you or allows you to feel whatever emotions you need to expend.

CREATIVE WRITING

Creative and meditative writing doesn't have to be a scary concept if you've never offered yourself a chance to experience it. You don't have to be a professional or have an English degree. No one is going to correct your spelling (hey, even Stephen King can't spell!) or be the grammar police here. I never even considered creative or meditative writing until I experienced it myself as an adult. I just wanted to pass along what I learned so others could open themselves up to it.

For a meditative writing experience, make yourself a comfortable space. Do you want to write by hand in a journal or type on your computer? Do you want to dictate to your phone? Whatever makes you most at ease. Burn a candle (please be safe!), light some incense, put on some soft music, talk to God. Allow yourself time for silence and listening.

If you need some writing prompts to get you going, perhaps one of the following questions may help you:

1. How have you been invited to experience Advent this year as opposed to years past?
2. What does the journey of Joseph and Mary into Bethlehem look like to you?
3. What would you take as a birthday gift to Jesus if you could visit the manger? And what would you say to Mary when you saw her?
4. If this is a season of grief for you, what is it that brings on those emotions? What if someone told you it's ok to experience that and sit with it for a while instead of telling you how you should experience Advent and Christmas?
5. Go back to your sensory experiences this week and relive a moment all over again.

[illegible]

feast of



**December
12th**

Our Lady of Guadalupe

WEEK FOUR



*T*his final week of Advent as we truly prepare for Christmas, I invite you to think of birthdays. Reflect on your own birthday memories; birthdays you've shared with loved ones, birthdays you've spent alone, favorite birthday gifts, messages, greetings, and celebrations. Do you have children or grandchildren? Take the time to remember when they were born, use those sensory prayers we talked about last week and remember the sights, sounds, and feelings of that birth experience. Have you adopted a child or been adopted yourself? What do birthdays mean to you?

Reflecting on those birthday experiences, what you remembered and loved, and what you didn't, talk to Jesus about it. His birthday is coming, how might he feel about his time of birth? If you were going to throw a party for him, what would it look like? What would you wrap as a gift? What would you say to him as he thought of his mother and what she went through the day she held him in the manger?

Activity: Let's write a birthday card and letter to Jesus for Christmas Day. What do you want to tell him? Make it personal, no one else will see this but you and God. If you're feeling extra creative, why not wrap your letter in a special box and put it under your tree? Maybe you leave it wrapped year after year. Maybe you put a slit in the top and every year put a new birthday letter in it. Maybe you wrap a gift with your letter also. Maybe you put this letter on your home altar. This act of creative prayer can be just for you, or you can include your family and have everyone write birthday letters, or have the kids and grandkids make homemade birthday cards. What about a birthday cake for Christmas? Whatever you find most helpful and prayerful in your final week of Advent, share that with Jesus.

ALTARS & WORSHIP SPACES



Altars and worship spaces don't have to be traditional; they can be inside your own home. That's just in case, like me, you felt like you needed permission. Here is an image of one of my home altars. There are rocks and trinkets from my travels all over the world to holy places, and places with special meaning to me. There are oils and candles, crosses, rosaries, prayer beads, and icons. It's a small corner in my library room and it has become my most favorite place in the house.

What does your prayer space look like? If you belong to a church, what is it about your worship space that you most enjoy? What would you change if you could?

Activity: Create or update your own altar and worship space. What items around your home will be placed on it? Do you have icons or sculptures of Jesus? Are the Saints a part of your space? White candles are common for an altar space, will you have real candles or fake ones? Do you have rosaries or prayer beads? Incense? Oils like myrrh or frankincense? Now that you have learned some more creative ways to pray, how will this space be different for you? What do you dream of your space looking like if it's not quite there yet? Is it simple or is it full? Traditional or artistic? You can look up inspiration on Pinterest if you need some visuals. It can be small, or it can be a whole room. If it was me, I'd have a tiny house on my property that I would turn into a chapel and fill every inch with icons, religious art, and inspiration. Write about or draw your space how it looks now or how you want it to in the future.

OTHER CREATIVE IDEAS

*T*here are so many creative ways to pray I could write a whole book about it or teach a series of classes (foretelling of the future? Maybe!). But I am going to share some more easy and active ways to pray that you can do from home by yourself or with your family this Advent season. I invite you to use these techniques as you meditate and pray, reflecting on this special time of year.

Activity: Another favorite way to pray is what I call “prayer stones.” You can collect a few stones that speak to you from outside your own house or from a local park. Take them home and use some acrylic craft paint to cover them. You can draw designs or just paint colors and let your hand take the brush where it wants to go. As you are painting your prayer stones, think about prayers you want to send out into the world; peace, forgiveness, kindness, loving thy neighbor, etc. You can even write some words on your stones once the paint is dry. When they are all done, find a local park or area where people like to take walks or pass by and leave them out in the open where a stranger can discover your prayer stone and either take it with them or leave it and admire it. The point is that you sent your prayers out into the world in a creative way to be witnessed by strangers who might need them more than you know.



Activity: Go to a craft store, an office supply store, or order online a decent sized journal with blank pages (better for drawing). Use some craft paint, paint markers, or whatever you have handy (always a good excuse to buy new art supplies!) and decorate the cover of your new journal. Label this journal as your “spiritual journal” and use the tools we’ve shared in this Inspired Prayer Journey to fill the pages. Or save what you’ve created so far in here too. I highly recommend getting a set of colorful sharpies, this is always my go-to! Have fun with it and make it totally unique, just like you.



Activity: Do you love listening to music, writing music or lyrics, or singing? Are you a shower disco queen like myself? HAHA! However music inspires you, take this time and listen to some of your favorite Advent hymns and seasonal music. What about their words or notes inspires you and reflects on your emotions? Write about that, write your own song, write your own notes, play an instrument, whatever helps you pray in this way.



IN CLOSING



I hope you found some useful tools in this little Inspired Prayer Journal I put together. Maybe you found some inspiration or creativity you didn't know you had? Maybe it was just a good read, maybe it wasn't at all. That's a risk we take as writers. But it's a risk I'm willing to sacrifice as I was called to share these words and prayerful actions with all of you. My call is strong, and I've learned to just shut up and listen.

Remember that your visions, experiences, and emotions are real. They are true. They are a gift. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. I've spent too much time worrying about what other people think of my experiences, when I discovered it was a feeling put there to prevent me from sharing.

Let Jesus dwell in your heart. Let his story flow through your breath and out into the world to inspire others. He wants that. God wants that. And most of all, remember that it's not enough to say we love Jesus, we have to love **LIKE** Jesus as much as we can, however we can, whenever we can.

Merry Christmas.

Love, Kristen





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