

# FINDING LIGHT IN THE DEEPEST DARK

JOURNEYING THROUGH LAMENT TO  
GRATITUDE THIS CHRISTMAS



**SANCTUARY**  
Mental Health Ministries

# INTRODUCTION

This Christmas will be unlike any other in our lifetime. Our day-to-day lives have changed and been heavily disrupted. There have been gifts and new discoveries; neighbourly connections have been renewed and we have found new ways to be a community. Yet for many, the dominant theme is loss. The rhythms of our lives have been shaken up. From holidays to seasonal events, through to worship in person or the simple act of meeting in a group—all have been upturned.

For those involved in church life, Christmas is a natural time to connect with our neighbours. Carol services, winter fetes, and midnight masses offer rich opportunities to draw everybody together. These Christmas traditions are often idealised for a reason; we long for the meaning and connection they offer. They also go to the heart of our purpose as a community: to extend and experience God's love.

Christmas is the time when we open the doors wide to our neighbourhood. Yet this year, it's different. In addition to the practical changes, many of us are tired, even exhausted. For some, the Christmas season can be accompanied by loneliness, with feelings of isolation only amplified in the pandemic. Those with ongoing mental health challenges may have found this year particularly hard.

**Whether your “perfect” Christmas is a luxurious dining table, a crowded living room, or a thoughtful midnight mass, this year will not be perfect. Perhaps this year is less a time to say to our neighbours “come and see,” but instead, “This has been a hard year—let us look for the light together.”**

What does it mean to look for the light? It means first acknowledging the darkness, then bringing it before God and allowing his presence to illuminate our circumstances and our hearts.



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed to be used by individuals or groups as a tool for reflection during Advent. The activities are likely to take 60-90 minutes to complete, with a recommended group of around eight.

Wherever you are, we invite you to go on a journey consisting of three movements: 1) lament, 2) reflection, 3) gratitude. Each movement will offer opportunities for learning, as well as time to contemplate, and activities to practice as you look for the light.

## What you need:

Everyone will need pen and paper—ideally multiple pen colors—as well as a candle and means of lighting it (a torch or LED candle can also be used). To listen to the music, the link on the resource can play through a computer. Make sure group members mute their mics and the facilitator shares computer audio if your group intends to listen online together. If you are meeting virtually, the image on page 10 can be displayed via a shared screen, or emailed in advance to the group.

## If you are leading a group:

As the resource explores emotive topics such as loss and grief, it is important that it is led with sensitivity. If your group includes those who have been bereaved recently, or who have found this season very challenging, please approach the session with particular gentleness. Remind participants that every exercise is optional and offer a follow-up conversation if needed. Consider who might be the best person to provide pastoral support and share this with the group. Take some time to read through the resource so you are familiar with it, making note of places where there are invitations to action.

## If you are using the resource by yourself:

Consider the best time to do this activity. In connecting with your emotions, issues may come up which are uncomfortable. Consider whether a follow-up phone call with a supportive friend might be worth arranging.



# LAMENT: Longing for the Light



## Learn:

Lament is a biblical practice, involving an expression of grief that offers us a way of navigating difficult experiences. Reading through the Psalms, we see God's people calling on him, reminding him of his character and his promises. Lament occurs in the context of an ongoing relationship. Even when there is despair, there is the expectation that God is present. God may seem distant, but he is dependable and true. The psalmists allow themselves to sit with their emotions and express them. In an article appearing earlier this year in Time magazine, N.T. Wright reflected on lament in the context of the pandemic:

*"It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell."<sup>1</sup>*



## Think:

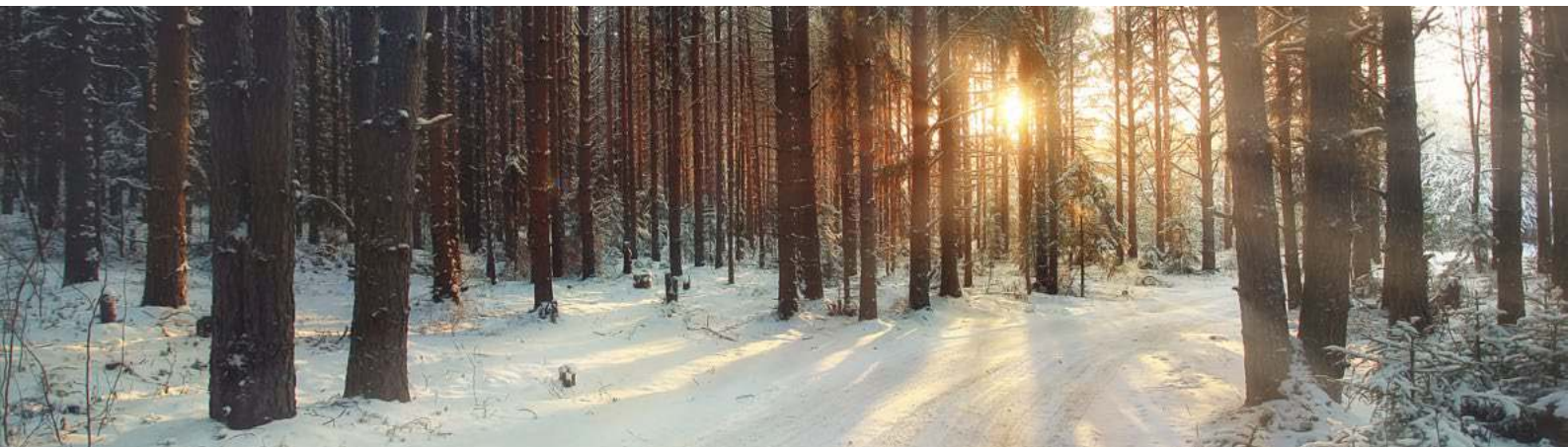
Ensure that everybody has pen and paper. This section will require several readers. As the group reflects on the opportunity to lament, encourage the readers to pause between paragraphs and questions.

## Reading 1:

The season continues to change and the nights are drawing in. What felt manageable in the sunshine may now seem much more challenging.

Perhaps the darkness feels more present as we head into winter. The lack of light itself may already be creating an emotional and physical impact.

1. N.T. Wright, "Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It's Not Supposed To," Time Magazine (March 29, 2020), accessed October 9, 2020, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/?fbclid=IwAR3CW1NrUbovNfbb-520VhjM0tK7VXTrGZBrpxloWneY6Yt1bXAd5Y2tY>.



Many of us have not been able to meet friends indoors for some time now. Whilst our children are back at school, some have been sent home following increased rates of infection.

Relationships may have become fraught. We may mourn the loss of a household that feels peaceful, and isn't crowded by people. Some of us may be overwhelmed by tasks and responsibilities, and the cumulative impact of stress.

## Reading 2:

Losses we have encountered this year may have been life-changing. We may have lost our livelihood, or been forced to change jobs.

We may have lost energy. We miss times when we don't feel exhausted.

The loss of a life with spontaneity. The loss of things happening with ease.

The loss of a life without low-level anxiety. The loss of stable mood.

For those of us who live alone, isolation, challenging before lockdown, may have become acute. We may be experiencing boredom and disconnection. Day-to-day tasks offer little pleasure. We may feel guilty for what we feel.

## Reading 3:

Take a moment to reflect on the last six months.

Become aware, if you can, of God's loving presence towards you. If this feels hard to connect with, remind yourself you are not alone, as Jesus' words tell us: *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). Offer yourself plenty of time. If you would like, make a note of your response to these questions:

What has changed for you in this time?

What has challenged you?

What do you miss from your life as it was?

Later, you will be invited to spend some time reflecting further on these experiences. First, however, take a moment to engage with the practice of lament in its original form—music.





## Practice:

Music can be a helpful way to connect with your experiences of loss. You may already have a piece of music in mind, or you may enjoy listening to “Our Song in the Night” from the Bifrost Arts album, *Lamentations*:<sup>2</sup>

*In the darkness, can you hear us?  
When the night comes, are we alone?  
Have you forgotten all of your children?  
When we remember you how we groan  
But our hearts cannot be silent*

*God, be our song in the night  
When the light is gone  
God, be our joy, be our strength  
Be our sheltering place  
Our song in the night*

*We are broken—are we forsaken?  
Has your love gone down with the sun?  
And your mercy through all history,  
Is it abandoned and undone?  
Oh our hearts cannot be silent*

*Your road, it led me down to the Red Sea  
The waters trembled, and you made a way  
You raised Your arm and led them to dry land  
Lord, will You hear us when we say  
That our hearts cannot be silent*

2. Michael Van Patten, “Our Song in the Night,” *Lamentations*, Bifrost Arts, 2016, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://bifrostartsmusic.bandcamp.com/track/our-song-in-the-night>.

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# REFLECTION: Looking for the Light



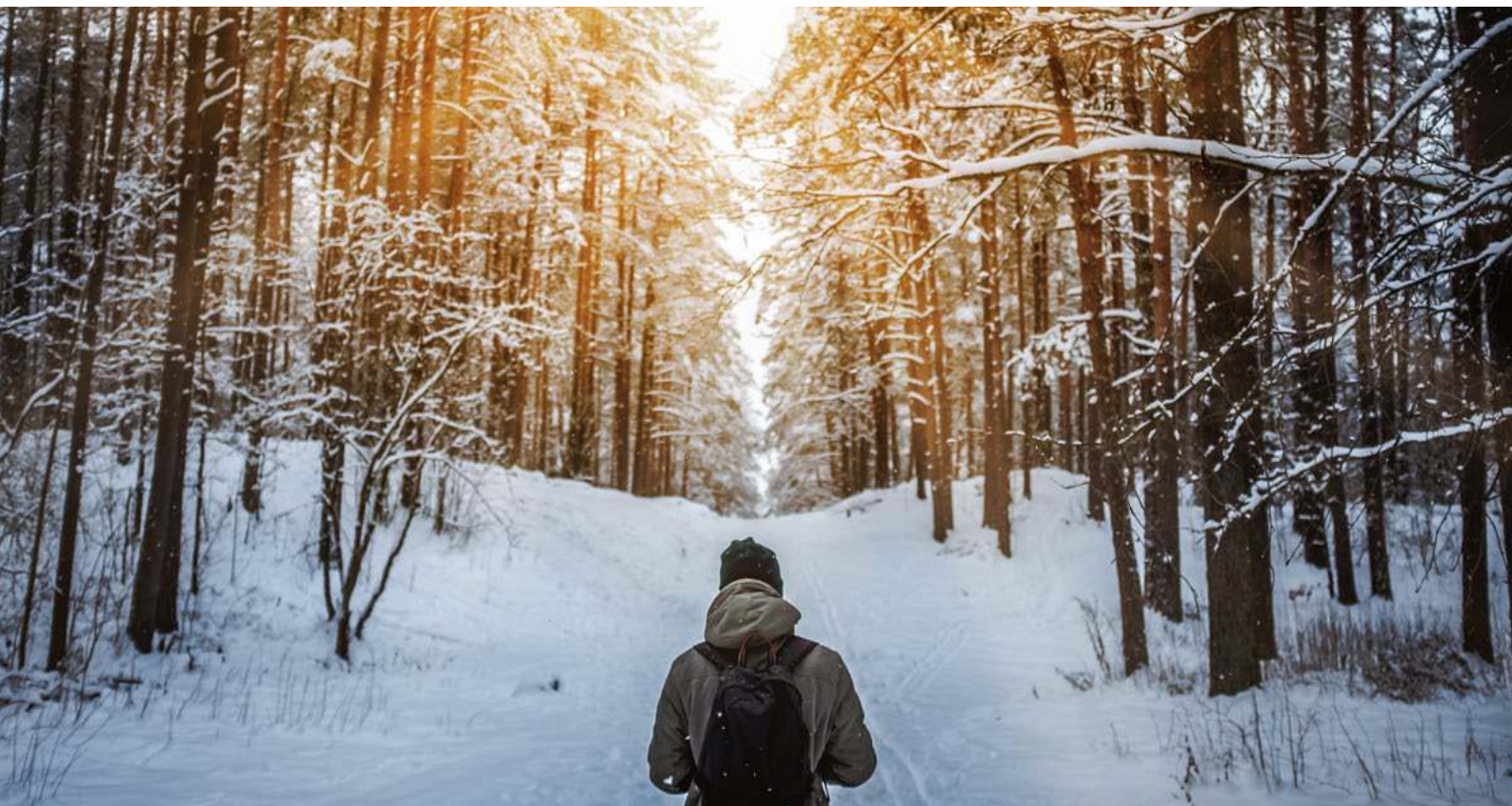
## Learn:

This section will require several readers. As the group reflects on the experiences of exile and grace, encourage the readers to pause between paragraphs and questions.

## Reading 1:

One of the challenges of this period is coping with change that is imposed on us. Times like this make it hard to plan, and it can be difficult to know what we can hope for. The structures and rhythms of our lives have changed and have not yet been replaced by anything permanent or familiar. As we wait to see if our freedoms will return, this impacts our relationships.

God's people experienced displacement throughout the Bible. And around the world we know that refugees face the difficult decision of leaving their homeland. For many of us, this year's removal of choices and accompanying disruption creates an echo of exile. Choices are reduced. We feel oppressed by external constraints and lack the freedom we once had. Although not geographical exiles, we may feel exiled from our normal life.



## Reading 2:

The book of Isaiah, written during a time of exile, offers us this:

*“The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,  
on them has light shone.” (Isaiah 9:2)*

During a time of oppression for a nation, there comes a word of hope. Is it possible there are already lights shining in the darkness in this season?

## Reading 3:

Theologian Alexander Shaia names the moment this way: “This is the powerful message of Christmas we need at this point: that the deepest dark is not the place where grace goes to die—the deepest dark is the place where grace goes to be reborn.”<sup>3</sup>

We have all faced losses and heartache. Many of us feel weary. It may feel like the deepest dark this Christmas. Whether we are part of the church community or not, these experiences of loss may offer a point of connection with each other.

## Reading 4:

We are all in the upturned boat, clinging to the side. We are doing our level best to keep afloat, but many of us are struggling. In his Advent reflection, Brennan Manning offers a picture of being truly vulnerable, dependent on God’s grace alone: “We are shipwrecked at the stable... The shipwrecked at the stable are the poor in spirit who feel lost in the cosmos, adrift on an open sea, clinging with a life-and-death desperation to the one solitary plank.”<sup>4</sup>

The disruption of this year continues and losses abound. Could these disruptions also offer moments of grace?

3. Rob Bell, The RobCast (December 24, 2017), accessed October 9, 2020, <https://brobearblog.com/blog/alexander-shaia-rob-bell-mythic-power-of-christmas>.

4. Brennan Manning, The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell, 2004).





## Think:

Take a look at the image on the next page, made by the artist Scott Erickson. If you are in a group, ensure everyone can see the image, through a printout or screen share.

Once again, if you feel able, become aware of God’s love surrounding you.

If it’s helpful, recall the phrase, “the deepest dark is the place grace goes to be reborn.” Might there be an invitation for you?

Or, you may choose to draw from scripture: *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never extinguished it”* (John 1:5). Spend some time looking at the image on the next page, and see what comes to mind for you.

You may like to make a note, or to share what came up for you.



## Practice:

Take another look at Scott Erickson’s image of the candles. How does it speak to you? Perhaps you feel snuffed out. Perhaps you feel ready to share your flame with others. Perhaps you feel smoldering—unsure if you are going out or reigniting. However you feel, set aside some time to simply be, and acknowledge what you need at this time.

Whether we need the light, or are seeking to share it—both are equally welcome to share in the light and hope that Christ brings.

If you enjoyed using Scott’s image, you may be interested in his book *Honest Advent*. For more information, see the end of the resource.



You may need to adjust the zoom on the PDF in order to view the full image



© Scott Erickson



# GRATITUDE: Living in the Light



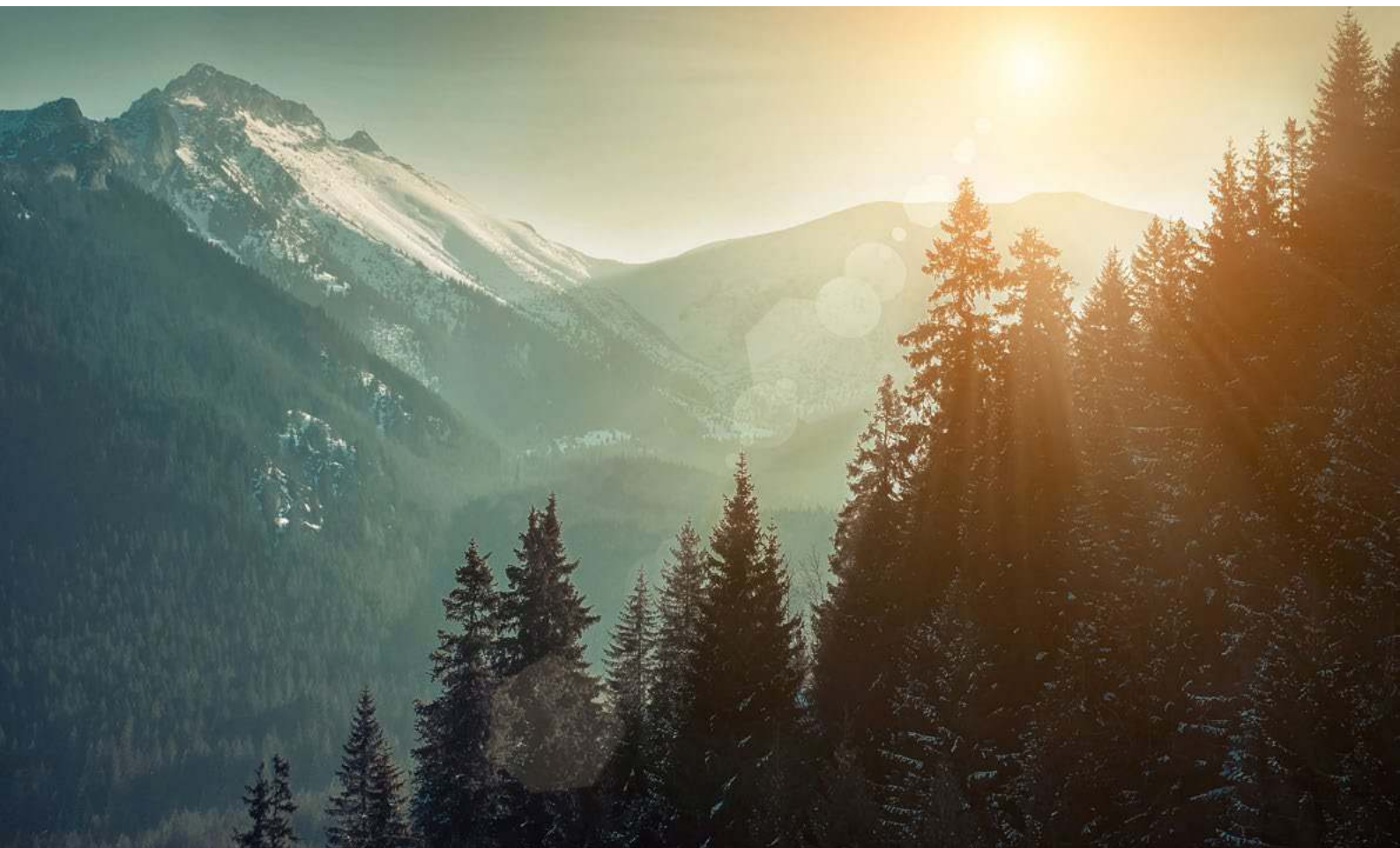
## Learn:

For some of us, the practice of giving thanks is a daily activity. In Thessalonians, Paul instructs his readers to *“rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). All of life is a gift and God is the giver of all goodness. This truth can be a reliable compass point in turbulent times. And some will be aware that the practice of gratitude has psychological benefits when incorporated into a daily routine.

Robert Emmons, Professor of Positive Psychology, offers this:

*“Gratitude heals, energizes, and transforms lives in a myriad of ways consistent with the notion that virtue is both its own reward and produces other rewards. Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships, relationships that are mutually reciprocal. Gratitude is one of the most common emotions that Christianity seeks to evoke and sustain in believers. The Hebrew Bible is replete with the motif that man owes God gratitude for life, health, and sustenance.”<sup>5</sup>*

5. Robert Emmons, “Thanks! The Science of Gratitude,” *The Table*, March 9, 2014, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://cct.biola.edu/thanks-science-gratitude/>.





## Think:

Write down some things you're thankful for. Circumstances may make it difficult to feel gratitude at the moment. Perhaps ask yourself where you have encountered meaning, encouragement, or hope this year? Maybe you're thankful for the way you've adapted and learned, or helped others?

You may find it helpful to draw a gratitude circle. It's a simple process of starting with a word at the centre, and then allowing words to come out from it, like rays from a sun. Here's an example:



You may like to share this with others—either in a group, or with a friend. How does sharing make you feel?

You may like to make a note, or to share what came up for you.



## Practice:

As we bring our time to a close, consider the ways you can offer some light in the deepest dark, either to yourself or those around you. As we have said, this year is less a time to say to our neighbours “come and see,” and instead a time to look for the light together.

Each member of the group should be invited to light their candle, or shine their light. If meeting online, asking each person to dim the lights at home and set their screen view to ‘grid’ will make the collective image more powerful.

How can you look for the light this Advent?  
Over this time, what has resonated with you?

Invite each person to share their intention as we head into this Christmas period. What might be the ways we can look for the light together, beyond this group? Are you inspired to hopeful action?

The following words might offer a helpful way to share thoughts: *“This Advent, I will look for the light by...”*



To conclude as you journey from lament to gratitude, we offer you a blessing:

“Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light,” Jan Richardson <sup>6</sup>

*Blessed are you  
who bear the light  
in unbearable times,  
who testify  
to its endurance  
amid the unendurable,  
who bear witness  
to its persistence  
when everything seems  
in shadow  
and grief.*

*Blessed are you  
in whom  
the light lives,  
in whom  
the brightness blazes—  
your heart  
a chapel,  
an altar where  
in the deepest night  
can be seen  
the fire that  
shines forth in you  
in unaccountable faith,  
in stubborn hope,  
in love that illumines  
every broken thing  
it finds.*

6. Jan Richardson, “Blessed Are You Who Bear the Light,” *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), 47.



## NEXT STEPS

“Celebrated artist-storyteller Scott Erickson gives us 25 days of refreshingly new illustrations and meditations to rekindle the wonder of God-with-Us in this season. We often forget that the encounter with the incarnate Christ happens in unexpected places, like a pregnancy announcement in a time of political unrest and empirical bloodshed, the morning sickness of a Middle Eastern teenager, or the shocking biology of home birth that goes far beyond the sanitized brand of Christmas as we know it.

“Through contemplative observations, sacred questioning, and honest prayers, you will discover that the wonder of God-with-Us is still happening today—in your unexpected change of plans, your unaccomplished dreams, your unforeseen message in the stars, your humble new beginnings.”

<https://www.scottericksonart.com/honest-advent-book>

## MORE FREE RESOURCES FOR YOUR CHURCH

If you have appreciated *Finding Light in the Deepest Dark* you may be interested in other free Sanctuary resources designed to help your church develop awareness on topics of wellbeing and mental health.

*Faith, Grief, and COVID-19: A Conversation* is a resource that addresses the questions so many of us are facing during this pandemic: How do we understand and process grief as people of faith? How can we support vulnerable and grieving members of our community while practicing physical distancing? Where can we find hope and joy in this season?

<https://www.sanctuarymentalhealth.org/about-faith-grief-and-covid-19/>



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To contact Sanctuary's UK director, Corin Pilling, email: [corin@sanctuarymentalhealth.org](mailto:corin@sanctuarymentalhealth.org)

## THE SANCTUARY COURSE

An eight-week study guide designed for small groups, *The Sanctuary Course* uses educational content, films, and discussion questions to explore mental health from psychological, social, and theological perspectives.

**Learn more about *The Sanctuary Course***

## WITH THANKS

The work of Sanctuary has been made possible by the generosity of donors, volunteers, and staff over many years. It would be impossible for us to personally thank the hundreds of people who have made this ministry possible, but to all of you we do offer a heartfelt and sincere thank you. May you and your loved ones continue to know God's peace in the midst; may he always be your sanctuary.



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