



the
POETRY
of **ADVENT**

AN ADVENT COMPANION TO
MARY OLIVER'S "DEVOTIONS"





**“TO PAY ATTENTION,
THIS IS OUR ENDLESS
AND PROPER WORK.”**

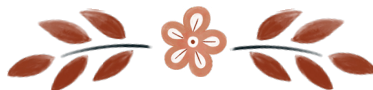
+ MARY OLIVER, “YES! NO!” (DEVOTIONS, P. 264)



Mary Oliver was born in Maple Heights, Ohio, in 1935. Partly to retreat from her difficult home life, she would often skip school and spend time in the woods around her house, reading and rereading the likes of Keats and Dickinson and Whitman. "I got saved by poetry," she later said. "And by the beauty of the world."

After dropping out of college, she made a pilgrimage to Steepletop in Austerlitz, New York, the historic home of the late, great poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Mary hit it off with Millay's sister, Norma, and ended up staying for seven years, helping Norma organize Millay's papers and working on her own poems. At Steepletop she also met the photographer Molly Malone Cook; Mary and Molly fell in love, eventually moving together to Provincetown, Massachusetts. There Mary lived most of her life, often walking in the early mornings among the forests, ponds, and dunes of Province Lands.

In 1984, Oliver won the Pulitzer Prize for her collection, *American Primitive*, and in 1992, the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems*. Over the years, she frequently explored the natural world in her poetry, often from spiritual perspectives, including Christian and Buddhist ideas. By the time of her death in 2019, she had become one of the most well-known and beloved poets in the English-speaking world.



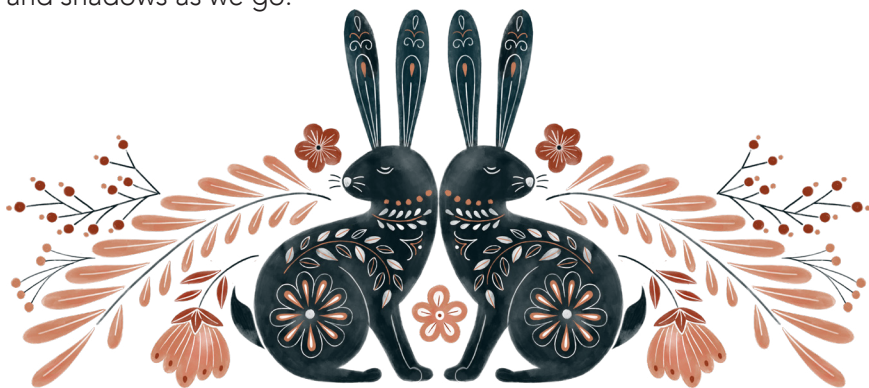
INTRODUCTION

The word “Advent” means *coming* or *arrival*. It’s the season of actively waiting and preparing for Jesus to be born, broadening our hearts and minds to welcome Jesus anew, and paying close attention to the ways Jesus is already coming into the world, God’s Word made flesh.

The Christian year begins not with the lilies of Easter, or the poinsettias of Christmas, or the stirring winds of Pentecost – but rather with Advent, four weeks in the shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow, and hate. For it’s here, in the shadows, that the God of grace will arrive. Waiting, longing, and preparing for that arrival, we light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Poetry can help us as we wait. As Mary Oliver often emphasized, the best poems help us notice and feel things we might otherwise miss, both the depths of despair and the heights of hope. In this Advent devotional, we let scripture and Oliver’s poetry be our guides, together pointing us toward weekly practices that can help deepen and enrich our experience of the season – a perfect way to prepare for the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christmas day.

So grab your favorite Bible and *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (the poems can also be found online). Week by week, we’ll make our way to Bethlehem, attending with care to the lights and shadows as we go.





WEEK ONE

HOPE

LIGHT

One Candle

SCRIPTURE

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Child of Humanity coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then Jesus told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Child of Humanity." + Luke 21:25-36



POETRY

"Yes! No!" and "On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)," by Mary Oliver (*Devotions*, pp. 264 & 134).

REFLECTION

As we dwell in the shadows during Advent, Jesus calls us to "Be on guard," and to "Be alert at all times," for "the kingdom of God is near." This is a season of deliberate mindfulness and insight, a time of remembering, with Oliver, that "to pay attention...is our endless and proper work." Pay attention to what, exactly? To the world around us near and far, from violets to mosses, moments of mercy to slices of melon, each one a sign of God's coming near with what Oliver calls "unimaginable glory." Be alert!

PRAYER

God of light and hope, violets and mosses, mercy and melons, be with us in the shadows of despair, anxiety, and grief. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the signs of your coming reign all around us. Sharpen our imaginations. Open our hearts. Fill us with your light and hope, so we might be lanterns of encouragement for others. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.

SING

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
"Come Ye Disconsolate"

DAILY PRACTICES

- Light a candle of mindfulness. Keep it close: as you do dishes, eat a meal, read a book...
- Lift someone's spirits this week. Call or connect with a relative or friend who lives far away, and let them know how much you appreciate them, and why.

- Conversation starters: On your most difficult days, what gives you hope? What signs of hope, near or far, have lately come to your attention? Oliver contends that “it is not hard to understand / where God’s body is, it is / everywhere and everything”; where have you glimpsed God’s body this week?
- More light: In this week’s passage, Jesus strikingly counsels us to “be on guard” against becoming consumed by “the worries of this life.” With this in mind, read Oliver’s “I Worried” (*Devotions*, p. 59). Jesus also speaks of conspicuous signs and portents in the world around us; Oliver argues – for example, in “I Wake Close to Morning” (*Devotions*, p. 3) – that such marvels are everywhere, if we have eyes to see. And finally, most apocalyptic visions of “the end” are provocations designed to get us to live our best lives here and now. In this spirit, read Oliver’s classic, “When Death Comes” (*Devotions*, p. 285).
- In this season of giving, remember your favorite organizations who are doing the essential work of giving people hope: food and shelter assistance, mental health care, job training, justice in the legal system, or crafting legislation to help make a more hopeful world. Visit them (online or in person) to learn more. Challenge yourself to give generously of your time, talent, and treasure – all for the sake of hope!
- Whatever your age, connect this week with someone considerably younger than you are, and ask them what their hopes are for the world. Better yet, form an alliance of hope and support.
- Following Oliver’s advice, take a “Yes! No!” walk this week, sharpening your imagination and your attention. Say “Yes!” to all the “dark lanterns” of beauty around you. And say “No!” to the temptations of apathy, self-absorption, inattention, distraction, and worry. “Serenity,” Oliver insists, isn’t something we “just find in the world” – rather, it’s something we cultivate with care and mindfulness.





WEEK TWO PEACE

LIGHT
Two Candles

SCRIPTURE

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" + Luke 3:1-6

POETRY

"Varanasi" and "First Snow," by Mary Oliver
(Devotions, pp. 55 & 371)



REFLECTION

John and Jesus lived among the shadows of enmity and war. Through Oliver's "Varanasi," we can reimagine John's baptism as a rite of peace, releasing us from shackles of antagonism, hostility, guilt, and shame. This is a baptism of changing our lives, of repentance and "forgiveness" – and for this last term, the Greek word Luke uses is *aphesis*, "release." What would such peace feel like, to lay down our swords and shields by the riverside? What shalom would settle in our souls, like new-fallen snow? Where do we need such peace today – in our personal lives, and in the wider world – as we prepare for Jesus to come?

PRAYER

God of shalom, Maker of the world, we pray for peace. Release us from the bondage of stress and strife. Grant us true repentance, so we may change our minds, our hearts, and our lives, and become peacemakers for the sake of your creation. Grant us the gentle snowfall of your grace, that demanding, tender mercy that makes all things new. Come, Prince of Peace, come. Amen.

SING

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"
"Down By the Riverside"
"Peace Like a River"



DAILY PRACTICES

- Light two candles: a candle of mindfulness, and a candle of shalom. Keep them close, and look for ways to make peace this week.
- Run a warm bath or shower, and remember your baptism (or Jesus' baptism). Experience it as a time of solitude, serenity, and tangible grace.
- Identify a relationship in your life where you could use some peacemaking, and take a step toward shalom. Send a hand-written note, reach out, or call – and if you can, spend some time together (online or in person).

- Conversation starters: Painting pictures of peacefulness, Oliver writes of a woman in the Ganges, and also of the first snow of the season. What does the essence of “peace” look like for you? What images come to mind? What steps can we take to make these images a reality, for ourselves and for our neighbors?
- More light: In Oliver’s “A Lesson from James Wright” (*Devotions*, p. 74), she contends that the peaceful silence in “some lovely wild place” is itself a poem worth attending to. Likewise, in “Blue Iris” (*Devotions*, p. 215), Oliver longs to become an “empty, waiting, pure, speechless receptacle,” a peaceful Advent image if there ever was one. And finally, quoting Isaiah, Jesus declares that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” – not only human beings, but all God’s creatures great and small, a sentiment echoing through Oliver’s classic, “Some Questions You Might Ask” (*Devotions*, p. 313).
- Choose a day this week (or part of a day; or part of every day this week) to intentionally fast from screens and devices, an unplugged sabbath time of peaceful retreat and restoration. Let “the questions / that have assailed us all day” fall away for a while...
- Most mornings, Oliver rose early and took a peaceful, attentive walk. She also regularly took night walks under the moon and stars, for “the heavens still hold / a million candles” – and we get a glimpse of a night walk in “First Snow.” Follow her lead this week, rising early or walking in moonlight, attending to the answers found in “silence and light.”





WEEK THREE

JOY

LIGHT

Three Candles

SCRIPTURE

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham and Sarah. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" John said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people. + Luke 3:7-18

POETRY

"Thirst" and "Mindful," by Mary Oliver (*Devotions*, pp. 141 & 173)

REFLECTION

This week we light a candle of joy, surrounded by shadows of sorrow and despair. What kind of joy? Joy that God calls us to lives of generosity and justice, and at the same time surrounds us with what Oliver calls "such beautiful lessons" along the way. Beautiful, yes, and also quite practical: *Got two coats? John asks. Give one away.* No need to get fancy, Oliver insists: "the ordinary, / the common, the very drab" are all she needs "to instruct myself / over and over / in joy." What generosity and justice – your own or the examples of others – gives you joy this week? What "chaff" needs to be cleared away from your heart in order for you to become more kind, more just, more joyful, more luminous?

PRAYER

God of grace and righteousness, delight and jubilation, God of good news of great joy for all people – we pray for our hearts, our homes, our world so full of sorrows. Give us the wisdom and courage to follow the call of your prophets, to bear fruit, to be generous and just in all we do. Instruct us in joy. Let our love for the earth and our love for you have long, fruitful conversations in our hearts. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.

SING

"Joy to the World" (yes, it's an Advent hymn!)

"My Lord, What a Morning"

"Angels We Have Heard on High"

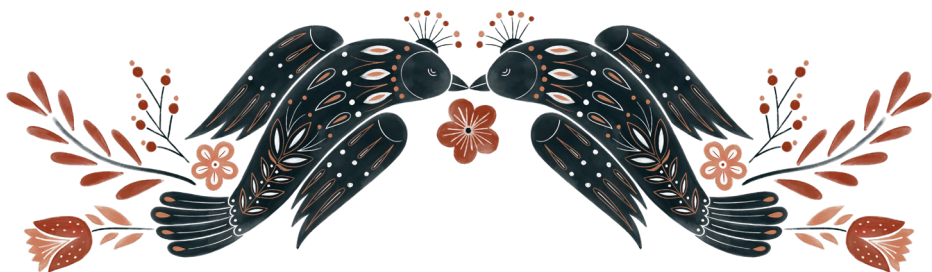
DAILY PRACTICES

- Light three candles: candles of mindfulness, shalom, and delight. Keep them close. Let them remind us to be generous and just, and to let our little lights shine!





- Take John the Baptizer seriously: participate in a clothing drive; contribute to an organization fighting for food security or economic justice; and look for tangible ways in your own life that you can carry out your callings with decency, integrity, and kindness.
- Conversation starters: Describe one of the most joyful times you've ever experienced, a moment that, to paraphrase Oliver, "more or less killed you with delight." What connections can you draw between joy, justice, and generosity? What joy do you long for in your life? What joy do you wish for others?
- More light: For Oliver's advice on experiencing joy, see "Don't Hesitate" (*Devotions*, p. 61). And for some "beautiful lessons" on deepening the joy in our lives, Oliver points to three teachers: a thrush in "North Country," a wren in "I Happened to Be Standing," and a little dog in "The Storm" (*Devotions*, pp. 157, 46, & 31).
- Here's a joyful one: Order some "flash paper" online (or in a local magic shop); "flying wish paper" can also work. When you light your three candles this week, write on the flash paper the "chaff" you want the Spirit to burn away: a resentment, a burden, a fear, a sense of apathy or discouragement. Say a prayer for liberation – and then simply touch the paper to a flame, and watch the "chaff" vanish in a flash of joyful light!
- Oliver writes, "I have given a great many things / away, expecting to be told to pack nothing." Give something away this week (or a great many things!): to a friend, a neighbor, or an organization serving people in need.
- Inspired by Oliver, try an imaginative writing exercise. Take a walk and identify three creatures in the world that seem to you to be praying (think of Oliver's "prayers that are made / out of grass"). Then imagine the prayers, and write them down: What might the grass be praying? The trees? The stones? The "untrimmable light"?



WEEK FOUR LOVE

LIGHT

Four Candles

SCRIPTURE

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and Sarah and to God's descendants forever." + Luke 1:39-55

POETRY

"To Begin With, the Sweet Grass" and "The Chat," by Mary Oliver (*Devotions*, pp. 76 & 139)

REFLECTION

Alongside the candles of mindfulness, shalom, and delight, this week we light a candle of love, surrounded by shadows of fear, hatred, and contempt. Mary sings of a revolutionary love, God's love, a love that has turned and is turning and will yet turn the world upside down. And another poet named Mary, another singer in the dark, puts the world-changing power of love this way: "Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world." How has love turned your life upside down? And how might it do so again, as Christmas day comes near?

PRAYER

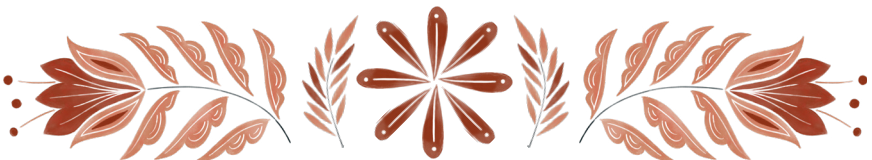
God of love, give us the strength and compassion we need to love ourselves, the sweetness and imagination we need to love the world, and the chutzpah we need to sing boldly, even and especially in the dark. Let us play our part in your revolution of love. Let us sing with Mary of how you delight in lifting up the lowly, scattering the proud, and filling the hungry with good things. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"

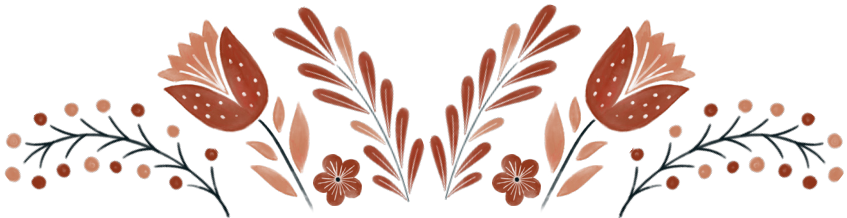
"Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow"

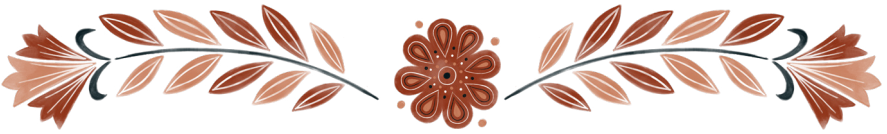
"Mary Don't You Weep" (check out Aretha Franklin's and Bruce Springsteen's versions!)



DAILY PRACTICES

- Light four candles: candles of mindfulness, shalom, delight, and compassion. Keep them close. Pray to become a kind of candle yourself, a beacon, a lantern of hope, peace, joy, and love.
- Make a playlist of songs for singing along this week: love songs and justice songs. Sing loud and proud, into the night – inspired not only by Oliver's chat, but also by her contention that the essence of living is "more than the beating of the single heart. / It's praising."
- Conversation starters: If Jesus' mother were around today, who would she be? Where would she live? What parts of the world need to be turned upside down? And if you were in her shoes – to whom would you go "with haste" for sanctuary and support?
- Now that this latter question has brought that special person to mind, take time this week to write them a "love letter," letting them know how much they mean to you.
- More light: For Oliver, the world is chock full of all kinds of love. For love among stones, see "On the Beach" (*Devotions*, p. 65). For the "ferocity" and miraculous power of love, see "Logos" (*Devotions*, p. 179). For the "utterly / Wild" power of maternal love, see "A Meeting" (*Devotions*, p. 384). And for a longer, evocative meditation on love in its many forms, see "From the Book of Time" (*Devotions*, p. 234).
- What birds are in your neighborhood? Draw or paint simple portraits of them on index cards, and add them to the Christmas tree.
- In honor of "The Chat," plan a music night: listening and singing and playing. And if you don't consider yourself musical, fear not! Oliver didn't either, and she sang anyway! Sing along with both Mary's, then, those bold and exuberant poets...





CHRISTMAS EVE

LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

SCRIPTURE

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" + Luke 2:1-7

POETRY

"The Night Traveler," "Lines written in the days of growing darkness," and "Six Recognitions of the Lord," by Mary Oliver (Devotions, pp. 407, 49, and 125)



REFLECTION

Christmas Eve, one of the longest nights of the year, is nevertheless a night of hope. In the shadows of empire and homelessness, it is nevertheless a night of peace. In the shadows of loneliness and despair, it is nevertheless a night of "great joy for all the people." And in the shadows of fear and contempt, it is nevertheless a night of love. The "Night Traveler" arrives with his wild, unnameable gift. A child is born, and with Oliver, we may hear again "those exacting and wonderful / words of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying: / Follow me."

PRAYER

God of mindfulness, shalom, delight, and compassion; God of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi, the powerful and the dispossessed: we thank you and praise you for being a God of the shadows. We thank you and praise you for bringing hope where there is despair, peace where there is conflict, joy where there is sorrow, and love where there is hate or indifference. Give us the grace and wisdom, the courage and boldness, to follow you and do the same. Thank you for coming to dwell with us, to live with us, to wake us up, calm us down, and love us back to life. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

Choose a favorite Christmas carol (or two)!

"Go Tell It On the Mountain"

"Silent Night"

"The First Noel"



**FOLLOW
ME.**



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS

