



The Greatest Gift

UNWRAPPING THE FULL
LOVE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

ANN VOSKAMP

Bestselling Author of *One Thousand Gifts*



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The Greatest Gift: Unwrapping the Full Love Story of Christmas

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*Your Invitation to
Unwrap the Gift*



Big and glossy and loud and fast—that's how this bent-up world turns.

But God, when He comes—He shows up in this fetal ball.

He who carved the edges of the cosmos curved Himself into a fetal ball in the dark, tethered Himself to the uterine wall of a virgin, and lets His cells divide, light splitting all white.

He gave up the heavens that were not even large enough to contain Him and lets Himself be held in a hand.

The mystery so large becomes the Baby so small, and infinite God becomes infant.

The Giver becomes the Gift, this quiet offering.

This heart beating in the chest cavity of a held child,

a thrumming heart beating hope, beating change, beating love, beating the singular song you've been waiting for—that the whole dizzy planet's been spinning round waiting for.

Waiting.

Advent.

It comes from the Latin.


It means “coming.”

When you open the pages of Scripture to read of His coming, of this first Advent, before you ever read of the birth of Jesus, you always have the genealogy of Jesus.

It's the way the Gift unwraps: you have Christ's family tree . . . before you have a Christmas tree. If you don't come to Christmas through Christ's family tree and you come into the Christmas story just at the Christmas tree—this is hard, to understand the meaning of His coming.

Because without the genealogy of Christ, the limbs of His past, the branches of His family, the love story of His heart that has been coming for you since before the beginning—how does Christmas and its tree stand? Its roots would be sheared. Its meaning would be stunted. The arresting pause of the miracle would be lost.

Because in the time of prophets and kings, the time of Mary and Joseph, it wasn't your line of credit, line of work, or line of accomplishments that explained who you were.




It was your family line. It was family that mattered. Family gives you context, and origin gives you understanding, and the family tree of Christ always gives you hope.

The coming of Christ was right through families of messed-up monarchs and battling brothers, through affairs and adultery and more than a feud or two, through skeletons in closets and cheaters at tables. It was in that time of prophets and kings, the time of Mary and Joseph, that men were in genealogies and women were invisible. But for Jesus, women had names and stories and lives that mattered.

The family tree of Christ startlingly notes not one woman but four. Four broken women—women who felt like outsiders, like has-beens, like never-beens. Women who were weary of being taken advantage of, of being unnoticed and uncherished and unappreciated; women who didn't fit in, who didn't know how to keep going, what to believe, where to go—women who had thought about giving up. And Jesus claims exactly these who are wandering and wondering and wounded and worn out as *His*. He grafts you into His line and His story and His heart, and He gives you His name, His lineage, His righteousness. He graces you with plain grace.

Is there a greater Gift you could want or need or have?

Christ comes right to your Christmas tree and looks at



your family tree and says, “I am your God, and I am one of you, and I’ll be the Gift, and I’ll take you. *Take Me?*”

This, *this*, is the love story that’s been coming for you since the beginning.

It is possible for you to miss it.

To brush past it, to rush through it, to not see how it comes for you up over the edges of everything, quiet and unassuming and miraculous—how every page of the Word has been writing it, reaching for you, coming for you. And you could wake on Christmas only to grasp that you never took the whole of the Gift, the wide expanse of grace. So now we pause. Still. Ponder. Hush. Wait. Each day of Advent, He gives you the gift of time, so you have time to be still and wait.

Wait for the coming of the God in the manger who makes Himself bread for us near starved.


For the Savior in swaddlings who makes Himself the robe of righteousness for us worn out.

For Jesus, who makes precisely what none of us can but all of us want: Christmas.

Sometimes the heart waiting for the Gift . . . is the art of the Gift.

This waiting, your art—mark it.

Mark Advent with a counting, a way of staying awake and not missing.



It could happen like the numbering of time, like the rings on a tree.

Like a leaning over that Jesse Tree of the Old Testament, that Jesse Tree axed down, and counting rings down to the greatest Gift, to life out of the dream cut off.

That Jesse Tree, named after Jesse, who was the father of David—David to whom God promised that his line and his sons and his family would reign forever without end.

And when David's sons and grandsons and great-grandsons turned from God and loved the gifts and the flesh more than the Giver and the Father—their kingdoms fell. Their homes fell apart.

It looked as if the whole family tree of Jesse had been chopped right off at the roots. But God . . .

But our covenant-keeping, promise-keeping God vowed, “Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. . . . In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place” (Isaiah 11:1, 10).

Out of the stump of our hearts . . .

In this day, this season, miracles will grow within, unfurl, bear fruit.

And the heart that makes time and space for Him to come will be a glorious place.

A place of sheer, radiant defiance in the face of a world careening mad and stressed.

Because each day of Advent, we will actively wait.

We will wait knowing that the remaking of everything has already begun.

We will linger over the lines of the Old Testament stories, tracing the branches of the family tree of Christ, the spreading pageantry of humankind, from Adam to the Messiah—each historical truth pointing to the coming, the already relief, the incarnation of God.

We'll still and slow and trace each exquisite ornament pictured with these twenty-five Advent narratives, each ornament cut slow out of paper.

And there He is—the exquisite Gift cut and given for us, broken.

The Gift who hung on a Tree for us, cut off.

The Gift who was pierced for you, wounded—your wounded, willing God, who unfolds Himself on the Tree as your endless, greatest Gift.

Ann Voskamp

Jesse Tree Invitation and Instructions



So. It's late November, and you'll need your Jesse Tree to wait for Jesus' coming. To come to the Christmas tree through the family tree of Christ.

Your Jesse Tree may take on a number of wondrous forms. A silhouette of a tree may be sewn or painted, cut out of felt, or quilted. It may be hung from the fridge, a wall, a door, a window.

Or you may use a small evergreen tree in an urn, a cluster of red dogwood branches in a vase, or a pot of hemlock, pine, spruce, sticks, or holly.

The ornaments can be downloaded from my website (using the code JESSE) and then printed out to hang on any tree of your imagining or envisioning. Just whatever you do . . .



*Anticipate Christ . . . and
Celebrate Christmas, His Coming*

All this Jesse Tree making? It's a bit like making your own family tree—a family tree with its arching branches of grandfathers and grandmothers, its sheltering leaves of aunts and uncles. To make a Jesse Tree is to trace the family line and heritage of your own forever family—the family of God.



Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot.

ISAIAH 11:1



DECEMBER I


It Is Advent: Come






Today's Reading

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.
And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the
LORD. . . .



In that day the heir to David's throne
will be a banner of salvation to all the world.
The nations will rally to him,
and the land where he lives will be a glorious
place.



ISAIAH 11:1-2, 10

The mattering part is never what isn't.

The mattering part is never the chopped-off stump.

It isn't what dream has been cut down, what hope has been cut off, what part of the heart has been cut out.


The tender mattering part is—you *have a Tree*.

Out of the last and forgotten son of Jesse comes forth one tender branch that will grow into a crown of thorns . . . a rugged cross . . . your ladder back to God. Jesus will go to *impossible* lengths to rescue you.

Out of the stump of that fallen tree, watered with the living waters that flow from the depths of His grace, a twig sprouts. That twig will be the scepter that defeats your sin . . . and lets you grow again.

Out of that stump and the sheared impossible there springs a singular shoot—tender and vulnerable.

There, here, in the midst of the inconceivable, the loud claims, the hard sells, the big spectacles, Christ comes small, the micro- macro-miracle who comes in the whisper and says, *Seek Me*. Just where you are, look for the small glimpses of God-glory breaking in, breaking out, sprouting, shooting, unfurling, bearing fruit, making a Kingdom, remaking the world. Slow and still. And seek the shoot that bears witness to God—the hardly noticed child, the hymn hummed over the sink, the unassuming



woman bent at the register, the dog-eared Word of God
beckoning from the shelf.

Gaze on shoots of glory to grow deep roots in God.

The theology of the Tree, of the Cross, always seeks the
presence of God in the belittled gifts of the world.

The small Babe of Bethlehem, the dismissed Son of
God, the stripped and beaten Messiah hanging exposed
on the Tree—He begs us to spend the attention of Advent
on the little, the least, the lonely, the lost.

Because in the rush, in the hurry, in our addiction to
speed—it might just be a bit like stepping on the shoot
that sprouts from the stump.

Advent, it is made of the moments.

This slow unfurling of grace.

Unwrapping More of His Love in the World

Plant wheat or grass seeds for every act of love and kindness you do today. Continue planting seeds for kindnesses throughout the Jesse Tree journey. Keep watering the sprouts until Christmas Eve. You're growing straw for the manger of the coming King! Love and new life are coming!



*In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is far off in the
deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can
tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold
your breath to listen. You walk up the steps to the front door.
The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or
almost nothing. For a second you catch a whiff in the air of
some fragrance that reminds you of a place you've never been
and a time you have no words for. You are aware of the beat-
ing of your heart. The extraordinary thing that is about to
happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just
before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.*

FREDERICK BUECHNER



A Moment for Reflection

In what ways do you feel like a lifeless stump, longing for a tender shoot of hope?

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What are you waiting for, yearning for this season?

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Where can you see new life coming in what you may have considered dead?

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