



# ADVENT UNBOUND

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AN ADVENT COMPANION  
TO PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA'S  
"POETRY UNBOUND"





"The Christian story of incarnation in the body of a boy – a boy whose ancestors were both famous and infamous – is one that can spur us towards living with the courage that is indigenous to us. To be human is to be in the image of something good, and image comes from imagination. To be human is to be in the imagination of God, and the imagination is the source of integrity as well as cracks. To be born is to be born into a story of possibility, a story of failure, a story of imagination and the failure of imagination. To be born is to be born with the possibility of courage. Hello to courage."

+ **PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA, IN THE SHELTER:  
FINDING A HOME IN THE WORLD**





God becoming incarnate in a human being is too astounding, too dazzling, too impossible an event to merely celebrate on a single day. We need to prepare beforehand, and extend the jubilation when it arrives (“On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love said to me...”). And so we add Christmas Eve to Christmas Day, a preparatory candlelight vigil. But even that isn’t enough – and so we design a whole season of anticipation, four weeks of waiting and preparing, all so we’ll be ready to welcome and receive Jesus when he comes.

The word “Advent” means *coming* or *arrival*. The Christian year begins not with the trumpets of Easter, or the wonder of Christmas Eve, or the winds of Pentecost – but on the contrary, in Advent, we begin in the shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow, and hate. For it’s here that the God of grace will arrive. And so it’s here that God’s church is called to light candles of heartfelt hope, peace, joy, and love.

Poetry can help, as can “unbinding” poetry from dusty bookshelves or intimidating expertise. The Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama’s beloved podcast, “Poetry Unbound,” is an inspiring case in point: evocative, accessible poems illuminated with sensitivity and insight by Ó Tuama’s commentary. In this Advent devotional, we let scripture and “Poetry Unbound” 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 a Bible and your favorite way of listening to the “Poetry Unbound” podcast (the poems and episode transcripts can also be read online at [onbeing.org/series/poetry-unbound/](http://onbeing.org/series/poetry-unbound/)). Week by week, poem by poem, we’ll wait and prepare and listen and sing, unbinding the season – and with God’s help, unbinding our hearts – along the way.

# WEEK ONE HOPE

## LIGHT

One Candle

## READ

*"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*

## LISTEN

"Poetry Unbound" episodes:

Lorna Goodison — Reporting Back to Queen Isabella

Katie Manning — What to Expect

Roger Robinson — A Portable Paradise



## REFLECT

We can't understand the Gospels – or Jesus, for that matter – if we don't understand them as written in a time of colonial occupation and war, emerging from under the boot of the Roman empire. Hoping against hope, oppressed people in the ancient world often envisioned miraculous deliverance, “with power and great glory,” as Jesus puts it here. But these lanterns of hope were lit from within the shadows of despair, from a position not of power and glory but of powerlessness and pain. The Season of Advent begins here, in these shadows. The first proclaimers and listeners to the Gospel were colonized people, and Lorna Goodison's “Reporting Back to Queen Isabella” can help us imaginatively step into their shoes.

Likewise, Katie Manning's “What to Expect” helps us step into Mary's shoes as a pregnant, unwed, hopeful teenager. We'll hear more from Mary in a few weeks (she's a poet, too, as it turns out!), but for now, let's reflect on her strength and resilience in the midst of the world's “expectations,” and the range of challenges into which Jesus will be born.

Finally, the human experience of hope is not only communal or familial; it can also be intensely personal. Roger Robinson's “A Portable Paradise” beautifully evokes this kind of private sanctuary – and it brings out another dimension of Jesus' counsel to “be on guard” and “be alert at all times.” We should be vigilant not only for the signs around us of God's coming reign of love, but also for ways we can keep our pockets-full of hope alive and well.

## PRAY

God of light and hope, love and justice, community and solitude, be with us in the shadows of oppression and despair. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the signs of your coming reign, the ones we find in the world and the ones we hold in our pockets. Keep us awake and alert. Help us expect love, expect justice, and live so as to help make them real. 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”

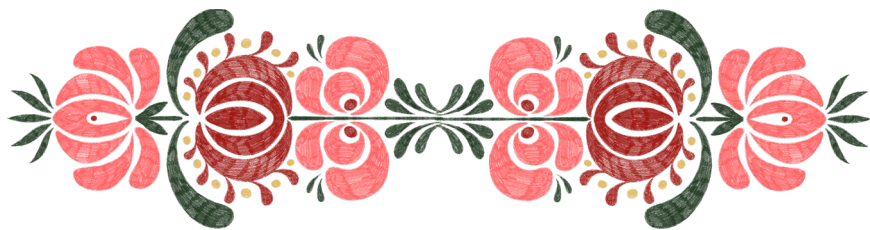




## DAILY PRACTICES

- Light a candle of hope. Pray for people struggling under the weight of colonization, past and present. Pray for women who are “expecting,” as well as for their families or partners. Pray for people everywhere, privately hoping against hope.
- Conversation starters: On your most difficult days, what gives you hope? What signs of hope, near or far, have you noticed lately? If you were to build a “portable paradise” with a few pocket-sized objects, what would they be?
- Take a step toward solidarity with people struggling against colonization: reach out to an immigrant family in your community from a colonized country; give to an organization that works in anticolonial ways; or learn more about the indigenous people native to where you live, or about the ways your life intertwines with the histories of colonization.
- Give your time, talent, or treasure to a local organization working to support pregnant women. And if you know any pregnant women today, reach out, connect, and offer your pressure-free support!
- Build a “portable paradise” with a few pocket-sized objects, and carry them this week (or throughout Advent and beyond!). Take them out occasionally into the lamplight. If it feels right, show and explain them to a trusted friend, and ask them to do the same.
- Going Deeper: In the series, “Poetry Unbound Plus,” Pádraig Ó Tuama has an extended interview with Lorna Goodison, exploring the connections between her work and the Bible. Not to be missed!





# WEEK TWO

# PEACE

## LIGHT

Two Candles

## READ

*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 Ituraea 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

## LISTEN

"Poetry Unbound" episodes:

Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo — Battlegrounds

Ilya Kaminsky — We Lived Happily During the War

Philip Metres — One Tree



## REFLECT

Like John and Jesus (and later, Luke), we live among shadows of war and rumors of war. Jesus comes proclaiming the dawning reign of God – but he arrives during “the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.” If we light a candle of peace this week, we do so surrounded by conflict, everywhere we look.

Even the ways we remember past wars are themselves fields of combat, as Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo makes clear in “Battlegrounds.” Likewise, as Bermejo points out, even acts of compassion arise in landscapes scarred by hostility. Nor can those of us supposedly “untouched” by the direct impacts of war escape complicity: Ilya Kaminsky’s “We Lived Happily During the War” underscores that in times of conflict, comfortable lives point to their own need for repentance and forgiveness – the very things John the Baptizer offers as indispensable preparation for the arrival of the Prince of Peace.

Moreover, Philip Metres’ “One Tree” lays out how shadows of conflict, and our need for God’s shalom, extend to domestic spaces as well. “Always the same story,” Metres writes, “two people, one tree, not enough land or light or love.” The story of scarcity is the petri dish for sin, the very thing from which John declares a baptism of *aphesis*, “forgiveness” – or, translated literally, “release.”

## PRAY

God of Shalom, we pray for peace. Meet us on our various battlegrounds; grant us the vision and courage to lay our weapons down. In our hearts, in our homes, in our communities, across creation, inspire us toward true repentance, changing war-making into peacemaking, contempt into compassion, evasion into empathy. 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 hope, and a candle of peace. Pray for people struggling with war and the ruin of war. Pray for those complicit in the making of war, including those who live comfortably and those who protest but not enough. Pray for people everywhere, struggling with conflict in our homes and in our hearts.
- Conversation starters: Where in your life do you feel complicit in war, near or far, past or present? What repentance (literally “change of mind” or “change of life”) do you long for? What work of peacemaking do you feel called to take up this week, this month, this year?
- Follow in Bermejo’s footsteps and enter “Mexicans in the Civil War” into a search engine. Share what you discover with a friend.
- Kaminsky is a deaf poet born in Odessa (former Soviet Union), now living in the United States. American Sign Language (ASL) is the fourth most common language in the U.S. This week, learn the ASL signs for “hope,” “peace,” “joy,” and “love.”
- Inspired by Metres’ poem, reach out to your neighbors this week, and build a bridge of kindness and good will with a simple, neighborly gesture.



## WEEK THREE JOY

### LIGHT

Three Candles

### READ

*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*

## LISTEN

"Poetry Unbound" episodes:

Li-Young Lee — From Blossoms

Martín Espada — After the Goose that Rose Like the God of Geese

## REFLECT

Among shadows of sorrow, grief, and despair, this week we light a candle of joy. Joy that God calls us to lives of simple generosity and justice: Got two coats? Give one away. Be fair. Be grateful. And joy that God promises to burn away the "chaff," the husks on our hearts that get in the way of doing such simple, beautiful things.

Sometimes joy bubbles up in the midst of grief and struggle, like a powerful, rule-breaking impulse to feed bread to wild geese. In Martín Espada's "After the Goose that Rose Like the God of Geese,"

the poet seems at once preoccupied by the past ("after, after, after"), and yet also reaching toward a kind of repentance, a "change of mind," a turning away from the past toward a new future. And how does this turning manifest? As an act of feeding; in its own way, a joyful act of care and generosity. As John the Baptizer, prophet of the wild, might have put it: *Got two loaves? Give one away...*

And at other times, joy bubbles up in the midst of simple blessings. A bite of peach, say, that contains multitudes: summer, trees, shade, dust, hands, and painted signs, "from joy / to joy to joy, from wing to wing, / from blossom to blossom to impossible blossom." In moments like these, the world's chaff seems to burn away, and creation shines like a tangible, tasteable Gospel of grace: "the round jubilation of peach." Nectar at the roadside. As if death were nowhere in the background. The simplicity of sharing, of dignity, of washing away the past in a river of repentance, and stepping out into the presence of "good fruit," abundant life, and joy.

## PRAY

God of wilderness and wildness, grace and dignity, 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 courage to follow the call of your prophets, to bear good fruit, to be generous and just in all we do. Free us from the husks that hem us in. Send us out to feed the world. Bless us with joy, from joy to joy to joy. 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 hope, peace, and joy. Pray for all those struggling with sorrow, depression, numbness, or despair.
- 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: What experiences in your own life do these two poems remind you of? Have you ever felt compelled to take an action that helped carry you through a time of grief? How about a moment of sheer joy that felt “as if death were nowhere / in the background”? What joy do you long for in your life? What joy do you wish for others?
- As Ó Tuama points out, Martín Espada’s poem suggests that sometimes, in the shadow of grief or sorrow, when we “feel some kind of impulse to do something that we can’t explain, but nonetheless, we feel we need to do,” we should “follow that intuition.” This week, take time to consider this invitation. Is there an impulse, an intuition, a tug at your sleeve worth attending to? Something simple and harmless, but nevertheless life-giving? And if so – go and do it!
- Inspired by Li-Young Lee’s poem, take time this week to revisit an activity that gives you joy: a particular food, spending time with a particular person, a place, a pastime, a project – whatever brings you jubilation!





# WEEK FOUR

# LOVE



## LIGHT

Four Candles

## READ

*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*

## LISTEN

"Poetry Unbound" episodes:

Patrick Kavanagh — A Poem About the Beauty of Home

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill — Ceist na Teangan (The Language Issue)

Emily Dickinson — A Poem for How Friendship Endures

## REFLECTION

Among shadows of fear, hatred, and contempt, this week we light a candle of love. Mary sings of God's revolutionary love, a love that "lifts up the lowly." In Patrick Kavanagh's "The One," God's extravagant interest in lowly, forgotten places and creatures takes the form of love breathed upon "a cutaway bog" – not just any old bog, mind you, but a "cutaway" bog, an area from which humans have "cut away" peat for commercial purposes (using the peat as a heat source, similar to firewood). In other words, part of Kavanagh's point is that this is no romantic piece of untouched, pristine nature – no, this is what many would consider a despoiled wasteland, a site of extraction and destruction. A lowly place "where no one important ever looked..."

And where does lowly Mary go, once she's received this astounding, revolutionary good news? She goes to her old friend and relative, Elizabeth, who is in the midst of her own astonishing pregnancy. Emily Dickinson's poem provides a sense of the power of certain loving friendships, the embers of which may stir in "a second," even after "Long Years apart." These are companions we seek "with haste" when joys or sorrows or life-changing challenges come our way.

As if catapulted by the warmth and assurance of this love, Mary breaks into song – itself an echo of her ancestor Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2:1-10). For all its brash confidence, it is also a song of hope: "I place my hope on the water," as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "Ceist na Teangan (The Language Issue)" puts it, into "a little boat" among the bullrushes, hoping for a new Moses, a new Pharaoh's daughter, a new deliverance and a new world. As Ó Tuama points out, though the Irish language doesn't have a verb for "love," its speakers find poetic ways to convey the underlying idea, including, "Mo cheol thú" — "You are my music." In this light, we can think of Mary's song as not only a song of praise, but also a song of love.



## PRAY

God of revolutionary love, give us eyes to see your affection for forgotten places and creatures, hands to stir the embers of loving friendship in our lives, and ears to hear your songs of love and deliverance, so we can sing along with faith and hope. God, you are our music. Help us play our part in your world-changing symphony. 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 hope, peace, joy, and love. Pray for all those struggling with fear, hatred, and contempt.
- Conversation starters: Where and when has love turned your world around? Where have you lately noticed signs of love and care in unexpected places (analogous to Kavanagh's "cutaway bog")? Who are the people in your life with whom friendship can be rekindled in an instant, even after "long years apart"? What songs have the most treasured place in your heart? And what hope for the world to you "place on the water," with a prayer that they end up becoming reality?

- Plan a nature walk this week – but not one to a place of “pristine beauty,” but rather to what Kavanagh calls “A humble scene in a backward place / Where no one important ever looked.” What signs of God’s love do you find there?
- Who is your “Elizabeth,” the friend to whom you run “with haste” when joys or sorrows or life-changing challenges come your way? Reach out to them and let them know what they mean to you.
- Make a playlist of songs for singing along this week – love songs and justice songs!
- If you’re the crafty type, make a simple woven “boat” or “basket” this week, and prayerfully place your hopes for the world on slips of paper. At week’s end, “place your hopes on the water” by sharing them with a friend, on social media, or, in the case of specific hopes for your community, by sending them on to an elected representative. As Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill reminds us, one never knows when “Pharaoh’s daughter” may appear!





# CHRISTMAS EVE

## LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

## READ

*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*

## LISTEN AND WATCH

Revisit the “Poetry Unbound” episodes that have been most meaningful to you this Advent season – and watch Pádraig Ó Tuama’s intriguing, provocative argument that “Jesus wasn’t born in a stable.” Check it out here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EO669XUrdu8>. (Or: search in YouTube under “Pádraig Ó Tuama Jesus Stable”)

## REFLECT

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. A child is born, and as Ó Tuama reminds us, “To be born is to be born with the possibility of courage. Hello to courage.”

## PRAY

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”







HELLO TO  
COURAGE.

+ PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA



# ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS