



Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Advent I

Images

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Living Advent I is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

Living Advent I is a Living Faith in Suffolk course to provide opportunity for reflection during Advent, beginning on 1st December. Each day looks at one from a collection of nativity scenes, with a reflection on some of the messages conveyed and some questions to stimulate personal thought. These aim to enable the reader to think widely around a range of aspects of the Christmas story and to make links between this and the wider story of Jesus and of our faith journey. Each day concludes with a Bible reading for further reflection.

This course is intended for individual use but it may be that users would like to meet each week during Advent to discuss reflections. Page 29 includes some questions to help with such group discussions.

This electronic course booklet is formatted for printing on A4 paper; users who would prefer an electronic document which prints as an A5 booklet can obtain this from
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Day 1. Journeying

We begin this Advent by thinking about the Posada, a Mexican tradition in which the figures of Mary and Joseph visit a different family in the church community each night, remembering their journey to Bethlehem and their search for a place to stay.



The journey would have been difficult, taking several days, and with Mary heavily pregnant. But the journey was not only physical. In the preceding months there had been much to get used to: the visits from an angel, his startling announcements, the progressing pregnancy, people's reactions, the questions about what the future might hold. God asked much of them: pregnant and unmarried, Mary could have been rejected, even put to death, by Joseph who faced possible disgrace

and humiliation at her apparent unfaithfulness. This was a journey of change, of acceptance, of becoming willing and prepared to do what God asked of them.

- When has God asked you to do something surprising?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the Christian journey being one of change, acceptance and willingness to be challenged by God?
- As we embark on the journey through Advent, what would help you to be more prepared to hear and respond to God?

For further reflection: Matthew 1:18-25.

Day 2. Movement

This nativity scene has a strong sense of movement, of travelling. The heat from the candles makes the propellers at the top rotate, causing each of the tiers beneath to move around the central spindle.



The top tier shows three angels trumpeting the good news of Jesus' birth.

The middle tier has shepherds with their lambs, journeying in search of the new baby.



At the bottom travel the Magi, bearing gifts and accompanied by a servant and camel. In the centre are Mary, Joseph and Jesus.



The Christian life involves movement: searching, following, exploring. As we look for God in the messiness of our experiences we discover not a nicely-packaged, gift-wrapped faith but one which needs to be worked out in the muddle, chaos and challenges of everyday living, as it was for all the characters in this scene. Choosing not to do this leads to a faith that is static rather than one that grows, develops and changes.

Movement is unsettling, though. Keeping the unchanging God in the centre of our exploration, as in this scene, provides us with a point of reference to hold on to.

- On what occasions have you felt that your faith has got stuck in a rut? What reasons can you identify for having got stuck? How much movement is there in your faith at present?
- What helps you, or would help, as you try to make sense of your faith in the messiness of life?
- What might you do differently to give yourself more opportunity for movement in your Christian life? You might want to talk to someone about this.

For further reflection: 1 Kings 19:19-21.

Day 3. Creativity

This handmade nativity scene took a long time to create. The dreaming and planning; the working of the clay; the moulding, firing, painting and glazing of each individual piece took, altogether, six months. At the outset it wasn't all planned; the ideas happened by degrees, evolving in response to prayer and imagination. Creativity involves an element of risk: the risk of vulnerability in creating something that can be viewed and used by others; the risk of it all going horribly wrong, collapsing or exploding in the kiln. There is also an element of trust involved in creating a work out of prayer: trust that it will produce what you and God intend.



Just as Mary participated in God's creativity in that she was being used by God to create something – God in human form was being created inside her – so when we allow God to work in us, we are participating in God's creative activity, contributing to the project he is crafting as he brings about his Kingdom on earth.

- When have you created something and how has it felt to do this?
- Creating something is a time-consuming process: how might it be useful to remember this when you think of God's involvement in the world as an ongoing process of creation?
- What might help you to take your next step in being involved in God's creative activity?

For further reflection: Exodus 35:30-35.

Day 4. Taste

Christmas includes all sorts of lovely foods – the trouble is that some, like this gingerbread nativity set, look almost too good to eat! But the thing about gingerbread is that it's meant to be eaten. However good this scene looks, the point of it is to eat it, to experience it; and until we experience it we don't really know whether it actually is good, it might look beautiful and taste awful! We have to taste it to know.

At Christmas – and usually throughout Advent too - we hear again the Christmas story, we sing the Christmas songs and speak of 'peace on earth and goodwill to all'. But however good it sounds, the point of it is to 'taste' it. Until we do that we don't really know whether the message of Christmas is truly nourishing or just beautiful ideas.



- What have been your responses to the Christmas message? How has it changed you, challenged you, healed you, or threatened you?
- What are the parts of the Christmas message that you need to experience (or experience again), rather than just hear? What might help you to do this?
- How could you help someone else to experience Christmas differently this year?

For further reflection: Psalm 34:1-14.

Day 5. Perceptions

The first Christmas was a tiny event in human terms. While a host of angels got involved in announcing the event and praising God, it was not an occasion of mass human celebration. Mary and Joseph were obviously much affected; some shepherds and, later, the Magi were too. But the coming of God into the world as a baby was not established as a festival until the fourth century.



Even then, the festivities formed the Christianising of an existing pagan festival rather than celebrating on the actual date of Jesus' birth, which was unlikely to have been during the winter as the shepherds and flocks were out in the night air.

Jesus' birth, by itself, was not a matter of great significance. Its importance comes when it is considered in the light of the rest of the story: his ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Together these initiate the bringing about of God's Kingdom on earth.

- What signs do you see of God's Kingdom on earth?
- How much is your perception of the significance of Christmas shaped by the commercial world?
- What might help you to give appropriate significance to the rest of the story?

For further reflection: John 1:1-18.

Day 6. Perspective

It is interesting that we associate the coming of Jesus with peace. Having a baby is not peaceful. Rather than ushering in a time of peace Jesus' birth provoked the opposite, as Herod ordered the murder of all boys aged two and under (Matthew 2:16). His was not a peaceful life: living in occupied territory, it was a time when attempted rebellion and armed revolution would have been thought about,

with those seen as threatening the peace quickly disposed of. He left the family business in order to pursue a ministry which he knew would be dangerous. He provoked controversy and challenged accepted attitudes and behaviour, ultimately to the point of his own execution.

However, this is not the whole story. From this violence and shame Jesus' death and resurrection bring peace with God, the opportunity for reconciliation.

- What modern-day examples are there of life being far from peaceful for Christians around the world?
- What do you understand by the idea of being reconciled with God?
- How might you ensure that this Christmas includes some peace?

For further reflection: Matthew 10:34-39.



Day 7. Paradox

This nativity scene is made from olive wood from Israel-Palestine where, both now and in biblical times, the olive tree is a common feature of the landscape.

Now, as then, Israel-Palestine is not a peaceful place to live. Caught in the unrest between the Israelis and the Palestinians are Christians of both Israeli and Palestinian origins, while across the world are descendants of those who have emigrated, fled as refugees or been expelled from the land during the turbulence of the twentieth century.

On the night of his capture, while his disciples slept, Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives, surrounded by olive trees, before being arrested in nearby Gethsemane. This nativity scene is a tiny symbol carved from something that forms another part of the story of Jesus. It encapsulates the agony of Jesus as he decides to submit to God's will, his suffering in his arrest and crucifixion, and the suffering of the inhabitants of that land in the ensuing centuries. Paradoxically, the olive branch is a symbol of peace.



- What does this image say to you by the way it incorporates both suffering and peace?
- How important is it to view the Christmas story in the context of the rest of Jesus' story?
- What might help you to do this?

For further reflection: Mark 14:32-42.

Day 8. Barriers

Construction of the West Bank Barrier in Israel-Palestine began in 2002, following more than a century of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Amidst ongoing international attempts to partition the land, return captives and bring about peace, the Israelis began to build the controversial barrier to mark the boundary of their land. In rural areas the barrier is a high, electrified fence with a vehicle trench, while in populated areas with less space it is an 8 metre high wall.

The barrier runs round and through Bethlehem. Families are separated from each other, from their land, their schools, their hospitals and places of worship. Going about their daily business means crossing the security checkpoint.

Had the barrier been in place in Jesus' time, as shown by this nativity scene, there would have been no entry to Bethlehem for the Magi and no escape for the infant Jesus when pursued by Herod. Barriers can be seen as providing security – or as imprisoning, or enforcing separation.



- What are the barriers you build around yourself? What are they for? In what ways do they separate you from others?
- How might these barriers impact on your relationship with God?
- What might help you to begin to break these barriers down?

For further reflection: Romans 8:35-39.

Day 9. Anticipation

We usually think about Advent as a time for getting ready for Christmas, celebrating Jesus' arrival as a baby, as illustrated in the nativity scenes. Advent calendars build our sense of anticipation and

excitement as they help us to count down the days. The Magi, watching and interpreting the stars and then embarking on their long journey to find Jesus, must have had such a sense of anticipation. So too the shepherds as they hurried to pursue the message of the angel. More than all, Mary and Joseph had the anticipation of bringing a new child into the world, with all that entails.

Traditionally, though, Advent did not so much look back to Jesus' first arrival but forward, to his anticipated coming in glory. The focus on waiting and preparation was not about preparing for Christmas, but rather about waiting and preparing for Jesus' return.

Having been waiting for nearly two thousand years, we have

lost some of the anticipation with which the early Christians waited. But we must not forget that we are still waiting, Jesus will come again, whether in our lifetime or not, and we will need to be ready.

- How much thought do you give to Jesus' return? What emotions does it evoke in you?
- In what ways does your understanding of Advent change when you consider it in this light?
- What preparation might you need to make in order to be ready for Jesus' return?

For further reflection: Matthew 24:42-44.



Day 10. Multidimensional

This is a two-dimensional scene, a flat image of the nativity. There are flat figures, surrounded by flat animals and trees. The shapes are beautiful – but they have no depth; looked at from a different angle they almost vanish into their surroundings, no longer carrying significance.

Sometimes faith can become flat, a matter of going through the motions of religious observance but without it spilling over into the rest of life. Going to church, celebrating communion or enjoying the social aspect of church activities can become the end goal rather than steps along the way.

But this is a flat image of something that is intended to be multidimensional, just as humans are created to be multidimensional. A faith engendered by a relationship with God extends into every crevasse of our lives, affecting relationships, work, outlook and decisions, leaving nothing untouched in our interactions with each other and the world. Love such as that represented in this scene cannot be flat.



- In what ways does your faith sometimes become flat?
- How do you feel about the idea of every part of your life being affected by your relationship with God?
- What might help your faith to become increasingly multidimensional?

For further reflection: John 10:7-10.

Day 11. Hidden

The image in this scene is hidden until you know how to look for it. It comes as layers of card, folded flat, collapsed in on itself. Only when it is opened into its three-dimensional state does the nativity image come into view.



It is possible to walk through the world never seeing God, never contacting or hearing from him, never finding him. Maybe circumstances hide him from view. Perhaps questions get in the way. Maybe it does not occur to us to look for him. Possibly we are afraid of seeing him.

But every now and then it is possible to notice him. An image, a word, Bible verses, or something someone says or does, jump out at us and draw our attention towards him. Maybe we need to look more carefully for God in our lives and in all things, so that he is part of our journey all the time.

- When has your attention been drawn towards God?
- What are the things that prevent you from noticing God?
- What might help you to deal with these obstacles? You might want to talk to someone about this.

For further reflection: I Kings 19:11-13.

Day 12. Boxes

The beauty of this nativity set is that, unlike those fragile sets which have to be carefully packaged in bubble wrap and stored safely in a large box, with some care it all packs away into a matchbox. It takes up very little space. The convenient packaging means that when Christmas is over it can be tucked away in some little corner and not thought about again until next year.



For many people the same thing happens with God – it is convenient for God to be there when we want him and packaged neatly away the rest of the time. But often

life is not convenient. When Mary said 'yes' to the angel's message, her role did not finish at his birth. From pregnancy onwards he was part of her life. For us, too, when Christmas is over and the trimmings are packed away, it is not the end. He is still there, wanting to be part of our lives.

- How much of your Christmas is not thought about again until the following year?
- When do you find yourself wanting to keep God packaged away rather than allowing him to be active?
- What could help you to allow him to be a greater part of your life?

For further reflection: Ephesians 3:16-19.

Day 13. Acceptance

There is a joke about a child's expression of "baby Jesus" being misheard as "baby cheeses", hence

the first picture here. This nativity set looks cheery and childish, full of bright colours and made from a kit using ready-cut sheet foam.



So is Christmas really all just for children? Is Jesus a joke?

When we start to think through the Christmas story many problems arise. Could Mary really have been a virgin, or is the relevant word simply intended to mean "young woman"? How do we date Jesus' birth, to fit with the biblical information about a census and Herod as ruler? Was he really born in a stable? What about the angels?

Rather than having problems with the story, children accept it at face value as having happened in the way they are told. Maybe we could learn from a childlike acceptance of what Christmas is about – God with us – rather than letting these problems – however real – get in the way.

- In what ways have you experienced Christmas as just for the children, and Jesus as a joke?
- What does the idea of 'God with us' mean to you?
- How could you give a greater focus to this idea this Christmas?

For further reflection: Mark 10:13-16.

Day 14. Reality

Like a children's cartoon – sweetened up, simple, colourful and easy to understand – Christmas has been sanitised. We have taken away the donkey poo, the blood, sweat and tears, the labour pains, the anxiety, the smelliness, the noise and confusion. Made into a pretty story we pull out each year, it has been cleansed of its yuckiness and made into something unreal.



But the Christmas story is very much a reality. There is the reality of God becoming a screaming, vulnerable, powerless child, in order to show us how to be in relationship with God. There is the reality of a life sparking controversy, conflict and dissent as Jesus showed us how to live out the reality

of the Kingdom of God. There is the reality of death before the resurrection, in order to set us free. Robbing it of its guts and grit means that we lose its message of salvation.

- Why do you think the Christmas story has become sanitised?
- What difference does it make to your image of Christmas if you take into account the yucky, unpleasant elements?
- What might God want to say to you in the reality of the Christmas story?

For further reflection: I Corinthians 1:18-25.

Day 15. Value

All around us, in the shops, in people's front windows – and maybe front gardens, in the streets and on television, are coloured lights, baubles, glitzy, twinkly things. That is how we celebrate Christmas.

Small as it is, this nativity set is full of glitz and glamour. In its intricacy there is a novelty value. In its material there is a feeling of grandeur. In its packaging there is a sense of the ornamental. At this time of year we may be drawn towards a bit of sparkle, the snazziness of Christmas.

However, Christmas isn't about flamboyance. Underneath the packaging, looking past the sparkling images to the message beneath, this jewellery box holds something of great value. Though having no economic worth, this box holds an image of love: an image of God who gave up everything for us.



Love does not always sparkle. Sometimes love is shown in the strangest of ways.

- What do you enjoy about the sparkle of Christmas?
- How does Christmas help you to experience God's love for yourself, and for others?
- How would you measure the value of Christmas?

For further reflection: Philippians 2:5-11.

Day 16. Memories

It can seem quite sad, on twelfth night, to pack up all the Christmas decorations and get back to normal. The house can seem bare; the streets dull without their colourful lights. Life moves on, into its seemingly never-ending routine. This Christmas seems but a distant memory; next Christmas seems far away.

This tiny scene represents the little bit of Christmas that need never be packed away with the Christmas goodies, but can be carried with you throughout the year. It is a yearlong memory of what Christmas is all about, always to be treasured. It is a reminder of the importance of the message, always to be acknowledged. It is the little bit of Christmas you need never leave behind.



- How do you feel when Christmas is over? Why?
- What is the message of Christmas that you want to hold onto for the coming year?
- What might help you to carry a little bit of Christmas with you when this Christmas season is over?

For further reflection: Philippians 3:10-14.

Day 17. Tradition

This is a traditional church nativity set, kept carefully all year and put out at the beginning of each Advent and blessed. It is a set that has been possessed by the church for many years and so



it is emotive for some people, particularly those who have been in that church for a long time. It represents the tradition of celebration in that place, the customs that have developed, and the memories that have been built.

This is an important tradition, the image of Christ coming into the world at Christmas. But traditions are not always good; when they are not reviewed frequently they can become an end in themselves instead of a pointer towards what really matters. It is important to work out whether a tradition has become a habit; whether it still has meaning or whether it needs to change. Sometimes, changing something can give it more significance, enabling us to see more of what it means.

- How important to you is tradition?
- How much of what you do at Christmas is ‘tradition’? How well do these traditions still point towards what really matters?
- In what ways might you be able to review your traditions and give them fresh significance?

For further reflection: John 8:31-41.

Day 18. Games

As children, games are a part of daily life. Through games we learn how to pretend, to share, to relate to others, to love. Through games we learn to interact, to cope with success, failure and jealousy. They provide a safe environment in which it is possible for children to explore how to prepare for life as an adult.



This little pack of cards has God running through it: the reverse of each card shows a nativity scene; the four traditional suits are replaced by angels, stars, sheep and cribs and the “King” card of each suit shows the infant Jesus. Our faith is something to enjoy. God has a sense of humour, and living out a

relationship with God is as much about expressing humour and joy with each other as it is about being serious and learning more about God. In playing, we learn about God, and we explore how to have relationship with him.



- What emotions does it evoke in you to think of God as having a sense of humour?
- How much are joy, humour and playfulness a part of your relationship with God?
- In what ways might you be able to build up this aspect of your relationship?

For further reflection: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

Day 19. Message

Christmas cards have been sent, in the UK, since 1843, in part as a way to encourage ordinary people to use the new Public Post Office which was able to offer a more accessible service than before because of the new railways being built.

Trains could travel faster than a horse and carriage, and could carry more mail, so sending mail became much cheaper. As printing methods improved, Christmas cards became more popular.

The cards pass on love to the recipients, the people we've met along our life's journey. But these nativity stamps take this a step further, reminding everyone who handles the letter who and what the festival is about. Alongside the message of love from one person to another is a reminder of the love which motivated God to send his son into the world.

The message is easy to miss. Handling many pieces of post, the repetition hides the image despite its obviousness so that it is seen and yet not noticed.



- In what other ways does the message of Christmas become hidden in its obviousness?
- Who are the people to whom you pass on messages of love? From whom do you receive these messages?
- How could you also pass on the reminder of God's love?

For further reflection: Philippians 2:12-16.

Day 20. Family

No stable. No star. No angels, shepherds, or Magi. No animals. This scene focuses on just three people. It could be any set of parents and any baby – the epitome of the traditional family, an idealised picture.



Families are much more complicated than just these three characters, though. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins might all participate in family events. Stepparents and stepchildren, half brothers and sisters, godparents and godchildren, close friends – all may be involved in family occasions, celebrating festivals, sharing joys and sorrows. And then there are those who are missing.

For many people Christmas is ‘all about family’. For others, though, this very fact makes it a painful time.

Jesus was born as part of a family, with all the joys and the heartaches that encompasses. His was not an idealised family; it was one which knew scandal, pain and bereavement as well as joy and laughter. Maybe Christmas is less a celebration of idealised family than a reassurance that he understands the real thing.

- Who are the people you consider to be your family?
- What difference might it make to you to know that Jesus understands some of the difficulties of family life?
- How could you ensure that those you call family know how much they mean to you?

For further reflection: Romans 8:13-17.

Day 21. Heritage

This is a simple scene: a mother and child, with the father standing over – protectively, perhaps. It is powerful, because of the love that it portrays: not only God's love, but the love of Mary and Joseph and what they went through for Jesus, the human love Jesus would have experienced from his parents. This was a heritage on which he was able to build throughout his life.

The discovery of this nativity scene was very significant. It is an identical copy of a scene from childhood, thus carrying with it nearly sixty years of memories of the journey that has led to today. It represents a childhood of learning and teaching received from parents, together with the essence of years of personal experience. Everyone remembers childhood Christmases, for better, or worse: parents have the power to give these memories for God to build on in later life.

- What are your memories of the heritage that has led you to this point in your faith journey? You might want to talk to someone about some of these.
- In what ways have you been part of someone else's heritage?
- How could you build on this over the coming year?

For further reflection: Proverbs 13:22.



Day 22. Foundations



This is Waterford crystal; a silver-plated tree bauble bought to give to whichever of the children gets married first, for their first Christmas together as a married couple, for them to carry Christmas into their own home. It is intended as a message of God's love, and to remind them of the love they have for each other. It is the foundation on which to build their family.

We all build our lives on something, whether by choice or default, and this foundation shapes what we build and how we withstand what life throws at us. Knowing that we are loved informs our outlook, our decision-making, our responses and our resilience. Building on God's love does not provide guarantee of an easy life, but it can give security and sturdiness.

- What are the foundations on which you have built your life?
- How are you shaped by these foundations?
- In what ways could you allow God's love to play a greater part in your foundations?

For further reflection: Ephesians 2:19-23.

Day 23. Shadows

There are no features here, only shadows: the symbol of God's love in shadow form. Such is his light and brilliance that we cannot see the finer details, we cannot enter fully into the scene; but we can see the imprint of love.



Much of life is lived in shadow. It is impossible to see clearly what God intends for our lives. We may get glimpses now and then, moments when things seem to fall into place, when the meaning of a past experience becomes apparent, or when the next step seems clear. But for the most part we live as we think is right, listening for when God speaks and trusting him to take what we offer and use it creatively. Perhaps in the future we will see clearly how our offering has been redeemed. For now, though, we need to hold on to the love that is still present in the shadow.

- What emotions does it evoke in you to think of yourself as living in the shadow of God's love?
- In what ways have you had glimpses of God making sense of your experiences?
- What might help you to hold on to the love that is present in the shadow?

For further reflection: Psalm 91.

Day 24. (Extra)ordinary

For Mary and Joseph, the events of these few days must have been something of a rollercoaster. Delivering your first baby is quite traumatic. So much could go wrong, and you have little idea what you are doing. Mary may well have been quite overwhelmed. Joseph, more used to animal births than human, may well have been rather panicked. Then, when the birth was over, there was not a great deal of time to clean up before the shepherds arrive... and so the ordinary yet extraordinary story goes on. At some stage they would have felt rather shell-shocked. Certainly for us, the experience is beyond anything we can begin to imagine.

The extraordinariness did not end there, but continued throughout Jesus' life, through to his death and resurrection. This scene, referencing John 3:16, looks at Jesus' birth through resurrection eyes: God sent his son to give us life, because he loves us so much. Extraordinary.



- What difference does it make to you to consider Christmas in the light of the rest of the story?
- In what ways have you experienced, or heard of, the (extra)ordinary way in which God works?
- What might God want to say to you in this?

For further reflection: John 3:16-21.

Day 25. Loved



There are no sparkles here, no embellishments. The simplicity of this scene, saying all that it needs to say, is what we can lose by all that we add to Christmas. The scene is plain and colourless – and yet still speaks of a depth of love. This is a love story: the story of God's love for us, reflected in a story of human love.

You are part of a community, a family. You are involved in this love story. You are loved, more than you can begin to imagine.

- What does it mean to you to know that you are loved?
- How could you make next year's celebration of Christmas more focused on this simple message?
- What could help you to better experience that you are loved?

For further reflection: Psalm 139:1-18.

Questions for group discussion

Each time you meet, share your individual responses to the pictures, reflections and questions from these days. What have you noticed? In what ways has God spoken to you? Share with others in the group what you found encouraging, surprising and challenging.

Then:

Week 1 (days 1-4)

- These reflections are all very active: journeying, movement, creativity, taste. What could you relate to in these images of the Christian life?
- What has been the shape of your journey so far? What steps might you take next?

Week 2 (days 5-11)

- These reflections have asked you to think more widely about the Christmas story in the context of its physical setting and its place in the bigger Christian faith narrative. What did you make of these wider dimensions? How have they changed the nature of your reflections about Christmas?
- What are the messages this week for your ongoing faith journey?

Week 3 (days 12-18)

- These reflections consider some of the adaptations and packaging of the Christmas story which can obscure it. How have these been challenged in your thinking this week?
- In what other ways does the message of Christmas become hidden or obscured? How could you address these?

Week 4 (days 19-25)

- These reflections have love as their central theme. In what ways is Christmas a love story? How do you feel about considering it like this?
- As you come to the end of these readings, consider how each of you has journeyed in your faith this Advent? What will be different as a result?