

5-Day Advent Devotional: Recognizing Emmanuel

Day 1: When We Forget to Look

Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14

Devotional: King Ahaz stood at the water supply, doing practical things while missing the sacred. How often do we become so consumed with managing our problems that we forget to look for God's presence? God offered Ahaz any sign—as deep as death, as high as heaven—but Ahaz had forgotten that seeking God was even an option. His spiritual vision had dimmed gradually, like eyesight failing so slowly you don't realize you're squinting. Today, pause in your practical tasks and ask: Where might God already be present that I've stopped noticing? The stars haven't left the sky; we've simply stopped looking up. Recovery begins with remembering that looking for God is not only possible—it's essential.

Day 2: God in Vulnerable Places

Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Devotional: Joseph faced scandal, confusion, and social disgrace. This was precisely where God chose to show up—not after the crisis resolved, but in the middle of it. Emmanuel means "God with us," not "God fixes everything." The vulnerable God appears in vulnerable places: a pregnant teenager, a carpenter's troubled dream, a situation that remained complicated even after divine revelation. Where are the vulnerable places in your life right now? The difficulties that haven't been resolved? God's promise isn't removal from hardship but presence within it. No chaos is God-forsaken. No vulnerability exists absent of divine presence. Today, look for God not beyond your struggles but within them, dwelling in the very places you least expect.

Day 3: Training Our Attention

Reading: Psalm 139:1-12

Devotional: The psalmist declares that there's nowhere we can go to escape God's presence—yet how often do we live as though God is absent? Prayer isn't about making God appear; it's training for attention. Worship isn't summoning the divine; it's practicing recognition. The old spiritual discipline of examining our day—asking "Where did I notice God? Where did I miss God?"—isn't outdated; we've simply forgotten it. Like people who once knew the constellations but haven't studied the night sky in years, we need to relearn what we once knew. Today, before sleep, review your day. Not to judge yourself, but to notice: Where was God present? What moments shimmer with sacred possibility when viewed through eyes trained to see?

Day 4: Holy Ground in Ordinary Places

Reading: Exodus 3:1-6

Devotional: Moses was doing his ordinary work—tending sheep—when he encountered the burning bush. The ground didn't become holy when God spoke; God revealed that it had been holy all along. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that earth is "so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars." What if the nursing facility, the food pantry, the doorstep where you deliver meals aren't just places you serve, but sites of revelation? What if your ordinary routines take you across sacred ground you've stopped recognizing? The vulnerable places you already visit may be precisely where God's presence is most clear—if you remember to remove your shoes, to pay attention, to watch. Today, approach one ordinary place as if it might be an altar.

Day 5: Becoming Watchers Again

Reading: Luke 2:8-20

Devotional: The shepherds were watching their flocks—doing what they did every night—when heaven broke through. Advent calls us to watchfulness, but not to watch for God to arrive. We're learning to see where God already is. Joseph almost missed it, ready to quietly end his engagement and move on properly. One dream changed everything—not the situation, but how he saw it. This is our Advent invitation: to become watchers again, recognizing God's presence in what we thought was ordinary or even disastrous. This week, practice watchfulness. Where is Emmanuel—God with us—already present? What vulnerable place might become revelation? What ordinary ground might reveal itself as holy? The child is already on the way. We need only remember how to see.