

The Fourth Sunday of Advent: *Spiritual Practices*

Advent is the season when we prepare for the coming of Christ. It is a time to wait with hope, to watch with expectation, and to open ourselves to God's presence in the ordinary moments of life. These practices can be done on your own, as part of your daily prayers, or with others in a small group.

This fourth week turns us toward **trust in God's presence**. The Gospel text, Matthew 1:18–25, tells the story of Joseph's disrupted life, his fear of scandal, and the angel's message that God is present in unexpected places: "*They shall call him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us.'*" Our companion this week is **Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1416)**, an English anchoress and mystic. She reminds us that God's presence sustains us in fragility and even in scandal—inviting us to trust not in outcomes, but in love.

Intro to this week's Christian Companion for the Journey: Julian of Norwich

Julian lived through waves of plague, social unrest, and deep uncertainty. As an anchoress, she devoted her life to prayer in a small cell attached to a church in Norwich, offering spiritual counsel to those who came to her window. In her *Showings*, she describes visions of Christ's suffering and love, insisting that God is not distant or condemning but intimately present, tender, and trustworthy. She speaks of Christ as both our Mother (as in birthing the Church) and our Savior, the one who holds us in compassion even when the world feels unstable. Her life and writings invite us to trust God's presence not as escape from suffering but as deep companionship within it.

Daily Prayer Practice

1. Each day this week
2. Light a candle. Hold a small object (a pebble, a bead, or a nut).
3. Pray slowly: "*God of goodness, give me Yourself; only in You I have all.*"
4. Sit for two minutes in silence, letting yourself be "held" in God's love.

Gospel Encounter: God With Us

Set aside 20–30 minutes with your journal. Light a candle, take a few breaths, and prepare to listen.

Step 1: Enter Joseph's story

Read Matthew 1:18–25 slowly, maybe twice. Picture Joseph's confusion, shame, and fear. Imagine yourself as Joseph—your plans disrupted, your reputation at risk.

Journal:

- What in my life feels disrupted, disappointing, or scandalous right now?
- Where do I feel powerless to “fix” things?

Step 2: Hear the messenger's opening words

The angel begins: *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid...”*

Journal:

- If the messenger addressed me by name, what would it sound like?
- What fear might the messenger name in me right now?
- How do I feel being told, *“Do not be afraid”*? Do I believe it? Resist it? Long for it?

Step 3: Receive the scandalous message

The messenger tells Joseph the scandal is holy: *“The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”*

Journal:

- Where might God, Emmanuel, be showing up in my “wrong place” or “undesirable circumstance”?
- How do I react to that possibility?

Step 4: Hear the promise of Emmanuel

“They shall call him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Journal:

- What does “God with me” mean? Even if my circumstances do not change?
- Where have I experienced presence that kept me from feeling abandoned?

- How might I let Emmanuel be enough, here and now?

Step 5: Respond like Joseph

“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”

Journal:

- What small act of trust or obedience is God inviting me to take, even without guarantees?
- What would it look like to “wake up” and live differently because of Emmanuel?
- What name or prayer do I want to speak over my life, as Joseph named the child Jesus?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Write a prayer beginning with:

*“God of Emmanuel, in my fear you speak...
in my disruption you are present...
in my weakness you are with me...
today I will trust you by...”*

A Prayer Experience: Held in Love

Find a small item to hold, a pebble, a coin, a bean, a nut, etc. Begin by lighting a candle. Take a few slow breaths, settling yourself in God’s presence.

Listening to Julian’s Vision

Hear these words from Julian of Norwich:

“And in this He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. It was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marveled how it might last, for I thought it could suddenly have fallen into nothing because of its littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always shall, because God loves it. And so all things have their being by the love of God.” (Showings, Chapter 5)

Sit with these words for a moment. Imagine the hazelnut in your hand—small, fragile, and vulnerable—and remember that Julian lived through plague, upheaval, and uncertainty. She knew the world felt like it could fall apart at any moment.

Entering the Prayer

- Take a small object in your hand—a bead, pebble, or seed—and let it become your “hazelnut.”
- Hold it gently and pray:
“God of love, you hold all things in your care. Even what feels fragile, you keep. Even what seems small, you love. Even what looks close to breaking, you sustain.”
- Pause. Breathe. Notice how it feels to imagine your life, and the world, sustained not by control or strength but by God’s love.

Hearing the Word

Listen to the promise of Scripture:

“They shall call him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23)

- Repeat quietly: *“God with us... God with me... God with all.”*

Prayer Prompts

As you continue to hold your hazelnut, reflect prayerfully:

- What in my life feels small, fragile, or close to collapse?
- Can I trust that it lasts because God loves it?
- Where might Emmanuel, God-with-us, be present in my vulnerability?
- Offer these places of fragility to God. Imagine them resting in God’s hand beneath yours.

Closing Prayer

Pray aloud or silently:

“Emmanuel, You are with me in what is fragile. You hold me in love. I entrust myself to You. Amen.”

- Blow out your candle, trusting that even in the darkness, Emmanuel is with you.

Walking Practice: Emmanuel in the Ordinary

This week, practice noticing God's presence in fragile, ordinary things.

How to try it:

- Take a 5–10 minute walk.
- Look for something small or overlooked—a leaf, a stone, a crack in the sidewalk.
- Pause. Whisper: *"It lasts because God loves it."*
- Ask: *"Where in my life do I feel this fragile? Can I believe God loves and sustains me here?"*
- End with the prayer: *"Emmanuel, God with us."*

Reference:

Colledge, E., & Walsh, J. (Eds. & Trans.). (1978). *Julian of Norwich: Showings*. Paulist Press.



These Advent practices were created by **Dr. Julene Tegerstrand**, co-founder of **Everyday Peacemaking**, a ministry that helps people nurture inner resources for peace and practice compassion in a divided world. I also offer **spiritual direction** for individuals and groups, providing space to listen for God's presence and tend to the soul. To learn more, visit www.everydaypeacemaking.com, subscribe to my Substack *[Human Is a Verb](#)* for reflections and practices, or contact me at julenet@everydaypeacemaking.com