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Guest Voices
A lit candle is seen on a wreath for the first Sunday of Advent in this illustration photo. (CNS/C

A lit candle is seen on a wreath for the first Sunday of Advent in this illustration photo. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Judith Valente

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After the cymbal clang of Black Friday, Cyber Monday and all the Doorbuster Days following Thanksgiving, the church calendar offers us the quiet, reflective season of Advent. In the midst of all that commercial noise, Advent tiptoes into our lives like a low hum on the wind, calling us to deeper listening and greater wonder.

I once had the opportunity to spend much of Advent at a Benedictine monastery. It struck me how much wonder is a part of the season's Scripture readings. So many miraculous happenings. All those surprise pregnancies. Mary receives a startling visit from an angel. Her cousin, Elizabeth, conceives a son in her old age. Manoah's wife, whose name isn't given in the Book of Judges and was thought to be barren, also ends up expecting a child.

You have Joseph receiving divine directions in a dream. And of course, there are those stargazing travelers from the East who decide to follow a strange star that scientists today might identify as a supernova.

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It's tempting — in fact all too easy — to think of these events as things that happen only in Bible stories, or only to people in a distant, more magical past. The truth is, we live in a world awash in wonder. There are everyday miracles right in front of us.

Botanists have discovered that trees communicate with each other through a series of root connections that allows a Douglas fir, for instance, to tell a birch tree that it needs some additional carbon. We just have to look to the images of deep space sent back to earth from the Hubble Space Telescope to know that the universe is vaster, more mysterious and more beautiful than we could have imagined.

Benedictine Sr. Maria Boulding writes, "If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve or desire ... or you could ever suspect," you are being drawn into the central mystery of Advent. "For Christ is born in us continually."

Still, we live in a world of high-speed internet, of speed dialing, speed walking, speed dating and even speed yoga. Reclaiming a sense of wonder is something we have to intentionally cultivate. I'm reminded of something a woman said who lost her sister, the mother of three young sons, in a mass shooting at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas.

> Reclaiming a sense of wonder is something we have to intentionally cultivate.
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Mynda Smith told The New York Times that after the shooting she and her family have told people, "You have to find light. You have to find the beauty. It's out there. Darkness is so strong, but light is stronger."

One of the ways we find the light is to keep alert for those small, simple moments of wonder that arise when we least expect them.

In her wonderful book, *Abide*, Benedictine Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr tells the story of setting out on a walk on an autumn morning, hoping to get in some quality prayer

time. But something unexpected happens.

"I looked around, and behold — everything was praising God through the simple act of being," she writes. "The carpet of needles in the pine grove, the geese honking their way through the skies, the arms of the oak tree stretched out in a beautiful welcoming gesture. … Everything, in its own way, was praising the Creator of heaven and earth. And thus it became clear to me; we need only be attentive, to enter into nature's contemplative prayer of praise."

One of the practices that fills me with wonder is to step outside each night and look at the sky. What a show the moon, stars and planets have put on for us this year with multiple meteor showers, four super moons and a partial lunar eclipse. It's almost as if the universe knows we need something to lift our spirits with so much chaos in the world.

The moon rises over Maryland's Chesapeake Bay in Chesapeake Beach Sept. 20. (CNS/Bob Ro

The moon rises over Maryland's Chesapeake Bay in Chesapeake Beach Sept. 20. (CNS/Bob Roller)

I had a similar awe-filled experience the first time I visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky. I awoke to attend vigil prayers at 3:15 a.m. As I walked down a hill from the guest house to the abbey church, spread out in front of me was a vast swatch of stars so thick it felt as if I could walk through that door of light. A monk later told me I had been looking at the Milky Way.

I felt something of what the Psalmist experienced who wrote:

> When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
>
> the moon and the stars,
>
> which you have set in place,
>
> what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
>
> human beings that you care for them?

… Lord, our Lord,

how majestic is your name through all the earth! (Psalm 8:3-4, 9, NIV)

Trappist Fr. Thomas Merton, the great spirituality writer who lived at Abbey of Gethsemani, writes in his essay, "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air," "Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open … but we do not know it."

Advent is the time to reconnect with those pieces of paradise. "The Advent mystery in our lives is the beginning of the end of all that is not yet Christ," Merton says elsewhere.

The season of Advent has a finite beginning and end, but Advent as an experience is ongoing. It is always unfolding because we are being called continuously to be Christ bearers in the world — a world that is infused with the beauty and wonder of God. That we are part of that call is perhaps the plainest, most wondrous Advent miracle of all.

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