

This reading is actually a pretty good one for Advent. The sower goes out to sow, Jesus begins. And when he explains the parable, he says the seed is the word of God.

The beginning of John's gospel tells us that Jesus himself is the word of God made flesh. Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Word. It's a time of reflection on what it means to be good soil...soil that's ready to receive the Word made flesh.

We talk about Advent as a time to prepare for Christ's coming in three moments – we prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth over 2000 years ago; we continually prepare for his coming into our lives in the present; and we prepare for his return at the end of all things.

Advent devotionals are filled with ways to prepare for the coming of Jesus at all three of those moments. Those devotionals will talk about things like setting aside time for prayer and meditation, scripture reading, worship, and practicing generosity.

In fact, if you read my Artificial Intelligence generated newsletter article for December, those are exactly the suggestions ChatGPT gave me. You'll also know I added to that to suggest making a concerted effort to make actual connections with people who you may not have talked to in a while, or people who might be lonely.

I'd also add music as a way to prepare our hearts. Maybe for you it's Christmas music. For me it tends to be music like Handel's Messiah or Gregorian Chant of O Come O Come Immanuel or Of the Father's Love Begotten.

Our responsive Psalm from Isaiah was made into one of my all-time favorite choral anthems – The First Song of Isaiah. It's one of those songs that I hear in my head when we read the passage. It evokes all kinds of good memories and gratitude for the God in whom we can trust. For me, it's good soil prep.

There's lots of good advice for preparing our hearts to be good soil. The problem is, we often fail.

We meant to do daily scripture readings and meditation, but whatever resource we planned to use now lies, gathering dust since the second day of Advent.

We meant to be generous. But we just couldn't settle on the best place to give to or couldn't find the time to go get a tag off of a giving tree and get the gift and get it back to the organization.

Maybe you had intentions of attending worship regularly – maybe even adding an Advent midweek service. But there was just so much going on, you needed some of those Sunday mornings to regroup. And now you're just feeling frazzled and sort of empty.

Or, maybe you have been devoted to Advent spiritual practices. And cooked, and baked, and shopped, and wrapped, and visited at least a couple local holiday events or craft fairs to support local businesses and to create beautiful memories. You've watched Christmas concerts and pageants, and you posted on social media that your heart is full.

Or maybe you've done all that and you're exhausted and just ready for it to all be over.

Or maybe your year has been one of those years that crushed you, and now you got nothing. Maybe you're grieving or you've been ill. Maybe finances are crushing you. You're trying to go through the motions, but you're like the line in the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse of It Came Upon a Midnight Clear – and you beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low. Your heart is a stony path through which no Christmas spirit seems able to break through.

Or, maybe you really have found the right balance of Advent spiritual practices and the hustle and bustle of the season. But the result of your Advent spiritual practices has been an understanding that what it means to be good soil, ready to receive the word made flesh, is different than you thought.

Because sometimes it takes a heart that is broken open and emptied to truly be ready.

Nobody wants to talk about broken, empty hearts at Christmas. But the reality is, those broken empty hearts might be the ones best prepared to receive the Word made flesh.

When you've got it all and done it all and your heart is full, is there room for Jesus to be more than just the final punctuation mark of the season?

At their best, meditation and spirituality practices help us detach from the things of the world we put so much stock in. Rather than fill us, spirituality practices help us empty our hearts and minds so there is room for Jesus.

But life has a way of doing that, too.

Life crushes the hard rocks of our arrogance and ego. It crushes our toughness – the toughness that tells us “you got this. You don't need anyone.”

Life forces us to face the scorching shame and self-loathing too many of us walk around with.

The beasts of sickness and financial worry threaten to devour us.

Life breaks in and empties our hearts. And here at year's end, a natural time of reflection, some of us may not feel like our broken, empty hearts are good soil at all.

But that is precisely the kind of heart Jesus needs. A heart and soul that have to admit their best intentions have ended in emptiness and defeat. Again, not themes anyone wants to think of at Christmas.

But there's a reason Blue Christmas services have become popular. They speak to people who are hurting. They are real at a time of year when the world sort of encourages us to put on a cheerful face no matter what...to believe in the magic of Christmas, whether we're feeling it or not.

The promise of Christ's incarnation is that he comes as one of us. But it goes beyond that. The promise of the whole mystery of Christ is that he came to actually dwell within us. Jesus is the seed, and God is completely indiscriminate about where that seed is planted or the quality of the soil.

If your heart is full of good rich soil just waiting to burst with life and bear fruit, Jesus comes to be planted there.

If your heart is full of the rockiness of grief, disappointment, or resentment, Jesus comes to be planted there, too.

If your heart is facing the scorching heat of your past mistakes, your trauma, your shame, Jesus comes to be planted there, too.

If your heart is facing the devouring beasts of illness, infirmity, debilitation, or addiction, Jesus comes to be planted there, too.

Jesus comes into a world that was not completely good soil when he was born, and it is not all good soil now either. But the message of the sower parable is that God does not wait for us to become good soil. God plants anyway and God plants everywhere.

It is good to follow the spiritual advice of Advent devotionals – pray, meditate, study scripture, sing, worship, give, spend time in community. They do help our hearts prepare. It is important to do the inner work we need to do to face our own rocky, hard-packed, or shame filled places and let them be broken open.

But just remember, when you fail, when your heart feels like a broken, empty, dusty vessel, you may actually be in the best place possible to receive that Word made flesh. You are perhaps in

the best place possible to truly understand what that holy birth over 2000 years ago means for us today.

This is a season of joy. But Jesus' birth into a world that is not always shiny and gold, his birth into a stable instead of a palace, reminds us that Jesus came into the good and the bad, but most of all, he came into the real, whatever your real is this year.