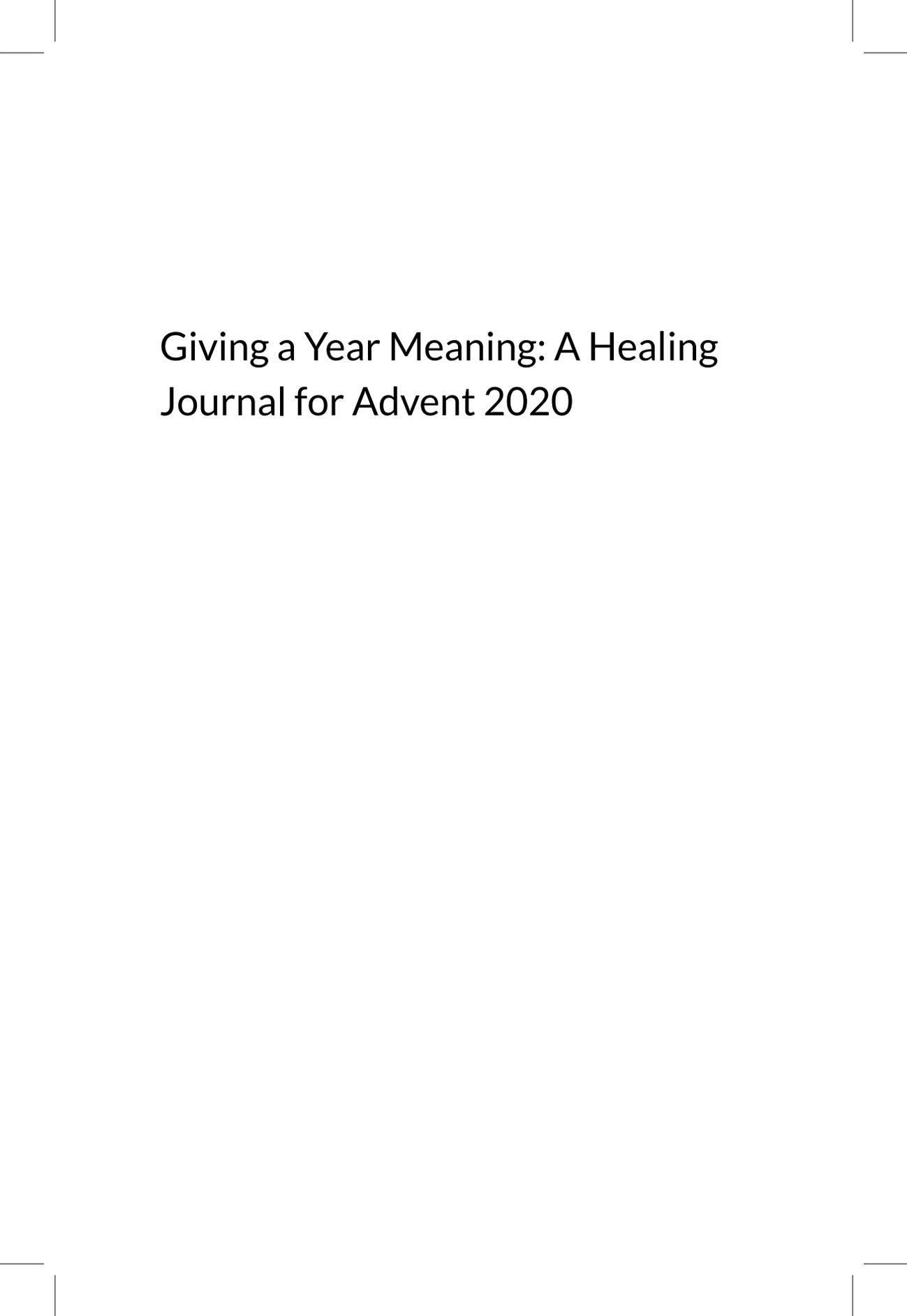


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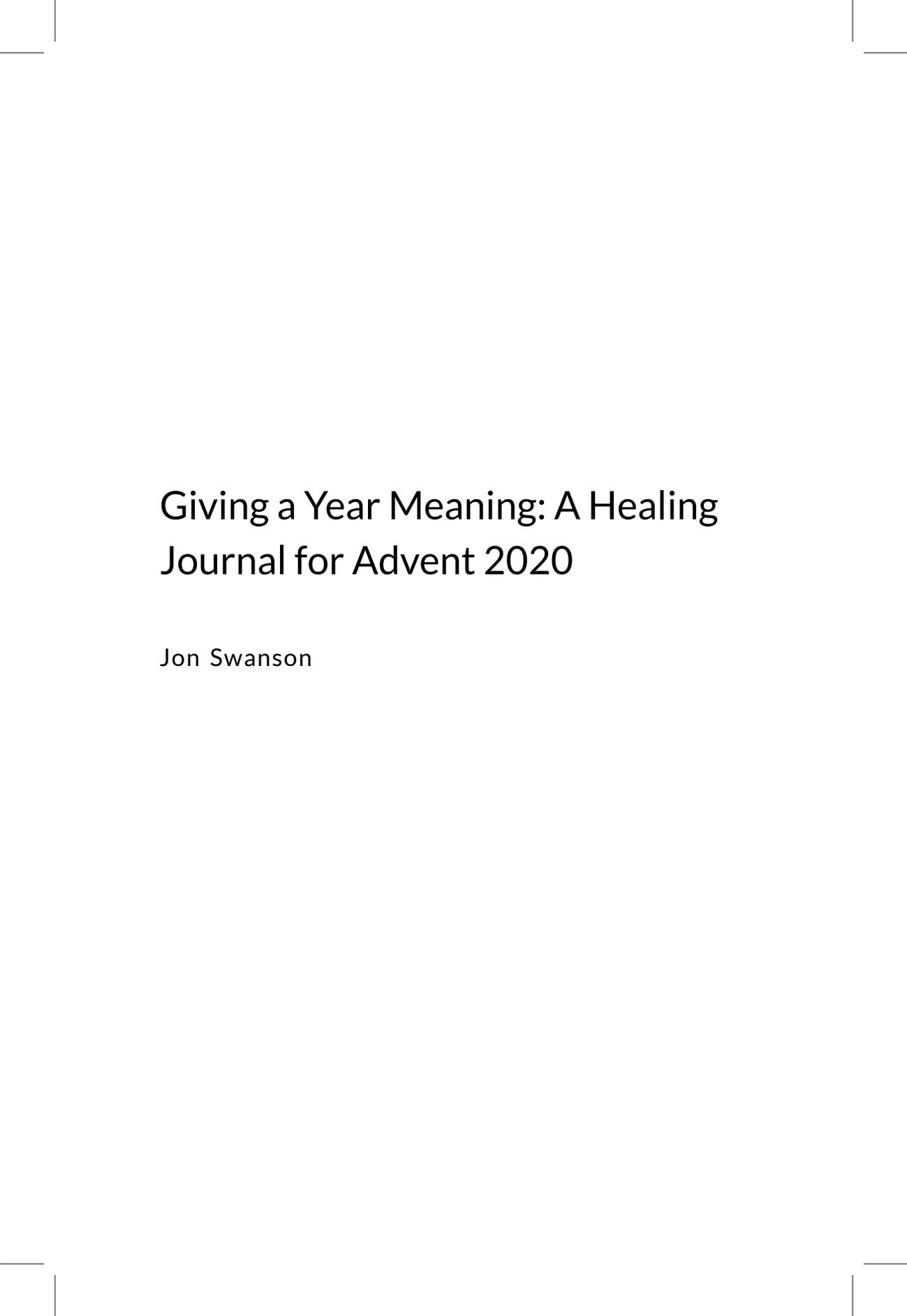
Giving a Year Meaning

A Healing Journal
for Advent 2020

Jon Swanson



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Introduction

Dear friends:

Years do not have volition. They cannot do things to us. But if they did, 2020 would be a mean one.

For many of us, anticipation of things in the future has turned into “What’s going to break next?” We have a longing for the past, a dread of the future. We are ready for the year to be over. And we are uncertain about the holidays between now and then.

As you likely know, Advent describes a few weeks of preparation before Christmas. In the Church calendar, it’s the four Sundays preceding Christmas, starting on November 29 in 2020. In church history, it came to be called “little Lent”. It was a season of fasting and reflection and prayer. By starting with this preparation, people would be more ready for Christmastide, the twelve days of Christmas.

What we often don’t consider is that Advent is about two arrivals of God. Even as we are anticipating Christmas, which is remembering Christ’s first coming, we are anticipating Christ’s second coming. This looking forward element can give hope, reminding us that the story isn’t yet done. The Incarnation is essential, but it is not the end of the process of redemption (sorry to sound churchy).

As I was thinking about “little Lent”, I realized that we lost “big Lent” in 2020.

Ash Wednesday was February 26, 2020. During the next 7 weeks, even those who don’t pay attention to the church calendar were giving up all kinds of things. Meeting with friends, going out

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to eat, attending church, visiting family members who were sick and dying and alone. By the time we got to Easter on April 12, everything in our lives felt off. The celebrations, both the Easter egg hunt part and the big church service part, were gone.

As a result of the pandemic, we may have lost the “choosing to refrain” part of fasting and Lent. We were in the non-reflective grasp of “having to refrain.”

And the year has continued with disruption and loss and uncertainty. We find ourselves annoyed with people we think we love. We find ourselves with a longing that we cannot name, a grief that lurks in the background.

I think that Advent, done differently, may help.

Many of us have seen Advent calendars. There are little tabs to pull revealing faces from the Christmas story or pictures of Muppets with the number of days until Christmas. There may be boxes with chocolates or the Elf on the Shelf Advent train. We’ve seen Advent readers, with stories or reflections for each day. (I’ve written two of those myself).

These are helpful for keeping track of days, particularly in typical years. However, this year, 2020, I think that some of us may benefit from a more deliberate process of reflecting and acting in order to bring some meaning to the year.

That’s why this book: *Giving a Year Meaning: A Healing Journal for Advent 2020*.

This is a journal to help us recover some of what we lost in this year as we prepare to move forward. This is not a devotional, with a collection of readings to reflect on. Instead, this is a journal with suggested reflections and actions. I want to help you remember some things you may have forgotten, to reclaim some people and moments you may have misplaced, to grieve some things you have lost, to celebrate some milestones you may have overlooked.

On each day, there is a suggestion of something to reflect on and space to respond. As you go through the day and week, you will find time to put into action the things that you named and commitments that you made. And there is a quotation that provides some context and support. If I had to describe the process, it's read, reflect, write, do.

I know. That sounds pretty abstract. And I won't ask you to trust me. Too many people have said that this year and have fallen short. But as I've been working on this journal, I've been thinking of my friends, specific people I know who have had a hard year. And that includes people very close to me. I think as we walk through these days and weeks, we'll find some healing.

A couple notes.

At 2020advent.com, there is a (growing) list of resources to help with things that come to the surface as you work on the journal.

I'm not a licensed counselor or therapist, and so this journal is not intended as a clinical process. I am, however, acquainted with grief.

The title of this book resembles a book I published earlier this year. *Giving a Life Meaning: How to Lead Funerals, Memorial Services, and Celebrations of Life* was published at the end of February, just as we began to limit those services. Just as a funeral helps us make sense of the life of the person we are honoring, this journal may help us make sense of our lives.

Peace.

Jon

How to Use This Journal

The journal is designed to lead you on a journey from the first Sunday of Advent through the end of the calendar year. Each day there is a way to be intentional in bringing order and healing to your life, if not to the year.

On some days there are places to make lists, to remember people and events, to make plans. On other days, your immediate action doesn't involve any writing.

Sometimes, you may want to make a note and return to it later in the day or later in the week.

In a group

As I was talking about this with our daughter, Hope reminded me that many people use Advent calendars together. Sometimes it's a family activity, sometimes it's a small group.

This journal works well for interaction. Each person can have a copy for their own reflections. However, you can have one copy and read the prompt for group discussion and completion. If it's a shared journal, I'd encourage note-taking by someone (or maybe everyone). The process of writing and the tangibility of the journal are part of the process of reflection.

The Hack

You don't have to follow the calendar. Some of the activities are more necessary (or less desirable perhaps). I hereby give you permission to hack the journal, taking items out of calendar order, skipping activities, and spreading others across several days.

As we begin, a prayer.

God.

This has been a year in which expectations have been disrupted. For the people we love, for the countries we are part of, for the communities of people and faith that we support, for the ourselves.

We've not had much time to think, many of us, because we've been so busy adjusting.

Would you give each of us the peace that passes understanding, the wisdom to discern what we can learn, the courage to do what we discover we must do, and an awareness of your deep love. And in it all, would you bring healing to our hearts?

Through Christ our Lord

Amen.

God.

We are on this journey of Advent in a year that feels really rough.

It's not the worst year ever. We know that objectively. But when our ways of working and living and interacting have been disrupted, it's hard to know where to stand, what to trust, what to assume will stay constant.

And so we turn to you. We light a candle today called "Hope" with the faint belief that this little light will somehow offer light in our lives and the lives of others.

May that be true.

Amen.

November 29: Hope

Hope is about confidence in an outcome we cannot see, a person with capacities we are confident in despite the current conditions, a trajectory that is true in time but not necessarily now.

Hope isn't a wish.

In approaching a journey of longing and expectation, we need to know where we stand when we are starting. List two or three things that you have confidence in at the moment, knowing of course, that this is a year where many things have changed. You can start simple and small (like being confident that your chair isn't going to collapse). You can get as larger or complicated as you want. There isn't a right answer to measure up to. There is your description of where you are.

<i>What are you reasonably sure of right now?</i>

**We ought always to thank God
for you, brothers and sisters,
and rightly so, because your
faith is growing more and
more, and the love all of you
have for one another is
increasing.¹**

1. 2 Thessalonians 1:3

**Those who go out
weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of
joy,
carrying sheaves with
them.¹**

1. Psalm 126

December 1: Better than expected

These days, we think a lot about what's not working, about what's not turning out the way we planned.

But today, thinking through the last few months, what's one thing you've been involved in that turned out better than you expected? Not in the country or in the world, but in your life.

It could be that you planted seeds and they grew. It could be that you had a conversation and it went well. (Maybe there was more than one.) It could be that you made it through the year when you weren't sure.

<i>What turned out better than you expected?</i>

**Finally, brothers and sisters,
rejoice! Strive for full
restoration,
encourage one another, be
of one mind, live in peace. And
the God of love and peace will
be with you.¹**

1. 2 Corinthians 13:11

December 2: Thinking about gifts

There's no telling what gift exchanges will look like this year. Maybe we can't afford them. Maybe we won't be able to get close to each other. Maybe we want to do more than a gift card.

So rather than starting with a *gift* list, start with a *hope* list.

For each person on your gift list, write their name and list one thing that gives them hope.

<i>A person on your list</i>	<i>What brings them hope</i>

**David took up this
lament concerning Saul and his
son Jonathan, and he ordered
that the people of Judah be
taught this lament of the bow
(it is written in the Book of
Jashar)¹**

1. 2 Samuel 1:17-18

December 3: Remembering lives

We've lost many people this year. Almost everyone I know has lost a friend or family member. At least one, some more than one.

What's been hard is that we've also struggled to find ways to remember. Memorial services have been small or impossible. Close contact with family members has been limited and often without touch. And so we've not been able to express the pain we feel by identifying the people we've lost and saying their names.

Today, make list of the people you have loved and lost. As you write their name, say it out loud.

Then, sometime soon, light a candle to remember them.

The act of lighting a candle of remembrance and saying their name out loud is a way of remembering.

**They sold property and
possessions
to give to anyone who had
need.¹**

1. Acts 2:45

December 4: Sharing a treasure

We all have stuff that we treasure. Things we've been given, things we've earned, things we've gathered. For some of us, our treasures are books. For some of us, blank journals or kitchen tools or amazing ideas. Sometimes we have grandma's jewelry or grandpa's stories. Sometimes it's a bit of cash.

Pick one (or more) of those things and give it away to someone who can and will use it as much as you will. (Or maybe even more)

Giving it while there is still life in it, still *your* life in it, will help them and you.

<i>A treasure that comes to mind</i>	<i>The person who could use it</i>	<i>The story you will tell them</i>

**But Mary treasured up all
these things
and pondered them in her
heart.¹**

1. Luke 2:19

December 5: Revisit

Flip back through the pages from this week.

- What are the blanks you are ready to fill in now?
- What are you remembering that you forgot?
- What do you know you still need to do?
- What are the patterns you see?



God.

We light a candle called “Peace” today, in longing that we can find some.

You invite us to come to you, to be still with you, to ask for wisdom, to wait.

From time to time your disciples just sat and listened. Sometimes it was a stunned silence after you calmed a storm. Sometimes it was an after-party silence when they were contented. Sometimes it was a mid-argument silence where they waited for you to respond to the question.

Would you help my friends listen? And would you please let them know you are with them?

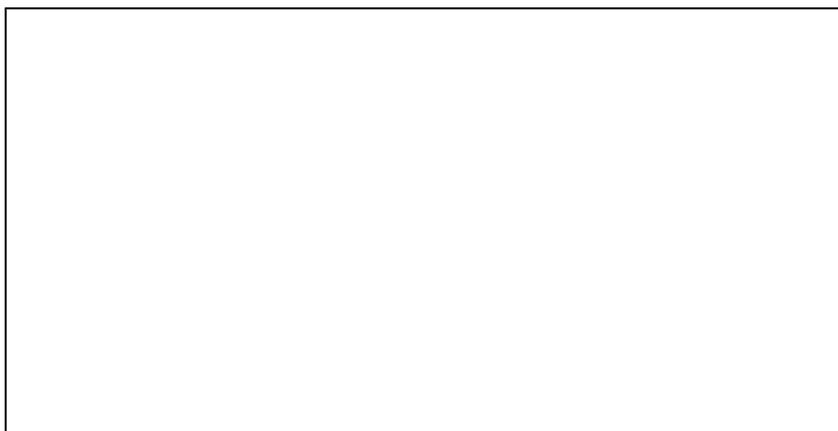
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen

December 6: Peace

Sit in a quiet room and say, “God, I’m listening.” You don’t have to sit long. It may be hard to find a quiet place. But simply stopping and setting aside the chaos for 10 minutes can open up a conversation with God. And you don’t have to ask for anything in particular. Simply say, “I’m here. I’m listening.” And listen with your heart.

If something comes to mind (or heart) write it down.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write down thoughts or feelings that come to mind during the listening exercise.

**“But to you who are listening I
say: Love your enemies, do
good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you,
pray for those who mistreat
you.”¹**

1. Luke 6:27-28

December 7: Bless

We've heard things we didn't want to hear this year, often from people we thought we knew.

Say a prayer for each person you unfriended or snoozed or hid in 2020. You don't have to put them back on your list. You don't have to be happy about them, But God invites us to pray for those who persecute us. And that may include people who are really annoying on social media.

You don't have to list names. But what are you asking God for as you pray for each of these people?

**I rejoiced greatly in the Lord
that at last
you renewed your concern for
me.**

**Indeed, you were concerned,
but you had no opportunity to
show it.¹**

1. Philippians 4:10

December 8: Consoling others

In the activity of the year, you may have missed offering compassion for the losses of a friend.

It may be that someone lost their mom or house or their job or their dream. At the time you offered a Facebook hug, but wanted to go back for something more and simply haven't.

There is still time to offer words to that person. A card, a letter, an email, a conversation can mean as much now as then. And it doesn't demand a big apology for why you waited. The greeting may be enough.

Make a list of 2-3 people that come to mind and what you can do to reach out.

<i>Names that come to mind</i>	<i>Loss they experienced (and when)</i>	<i>What you will do</i>

**Bear with each other
and forgive one another if any
of you has a grievance against
someone. Forgive as the Lord
forgave you.¹**

1. Colossians 3:13

December 9: Forgive

Forgive one person. Out loud.

In a room by yourself, out loud, say their name and then say, “I forgive you for that pain.”

You don’t have to tell them (though you could) but say the words and their name out loud.

Rather than starting with the worst situation that is calling for forgiveness, start with something small.

What are the initials of the person that comes to mind?

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.”¹

1. Luke 1:11-13

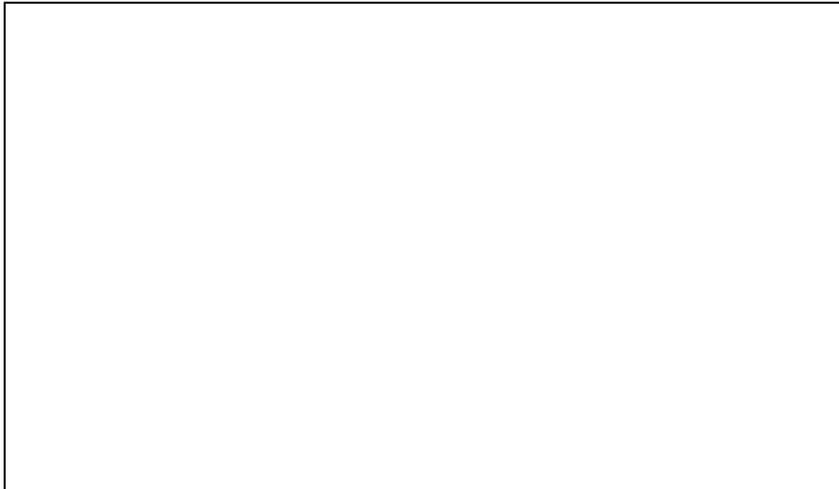
December 10: Addressing fear

Write down the third greatest fear you have. Not your greatest fear. That's too scary. And someone might read this. Or even your second greatest fear.

But write down your third greatest fear. Not here (unless you are brave!). Use another piece of paper.

Then tear it up into tiny pieces. You will have faced your fear. And already started to address it.

If you are really brave, you can do the same for your fourth greatest fear.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to write down their third greatest fear. The box is centered horizontally and occupies a significant portion of the lower half of the page.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”¹

1. Matthew 11:27-28

December 11: Smile

Sometimes, we realize that we haven't smiled in a few days. It's understandable. There's a lot going on. But sometime today, smile.

"But," you say, "How can I smile with all I've faced this year and all I've been through and all I've messed up?"

Ah. I can help. Remember the other day when we asked you to forgive someone? I bet you didn't pick you. So, right now, out loud, say "I forgive me for being so awful to me this year."

Really. Go ahead. Say it. And mean it.

Thank you. Now you can smile. Or cry good tears and then smile.



**But Mary treasured up all
these things
and pondered them in her
heart.¹**

1. Luke 2:19

December 12: Revisit

Flip back through the pages from this week.

- What are the blanks you are ready to fill in now?
- What are you remembering that you forgot?
- What do you know you still need to do?
- What are the patterns you see?



Epilogue

We made it.

It's the end of 2020.

Thanks for spending the time on this journey and this journal. If you are still here, you have thought and prayed and wrestled and laughed and wept.

As I writing these words, I'm not sure whether to suggest that you keep this journal or get rid of it. It captures some honest work on your part, and hopefully, some healing.

As I think about it, you could bury it, the way we mark the end of a life. You could cremate it. Or you could set it aside to review in the next months.

I will leave it to you.

Peace, friend.

Jon

About The Author

Rev. Jon Swanson spent 2020 working as a hospital chaplain three days a week. Watching his own challenges led to this book.

It builds on many threads. He's an ordained pastor with 15 years in church ministry. He's spent more than 20 years in higher education, teaching communication, management, and spiritual formation, and working as an administrator. Most recently, he's worked as a hospital chaplain in a Level II Trauma Center, and adjunct professor, and a consultant with churches and non-profits. And he's written about grief, prayer, Advent, Lent, and spiritual journeys.

Nancy and Jon have been married since 1983 and have two married children and a daughter in heaven. They've walked regularly since 2006, and he started running in 2014.

If this book – or any of Jon's books – have been helpful, please leave a review on Amazon.

Also by Jon Swanson

Books (all available at anewroutine.com)

Anticipation: An Advent Reader (2012)

Learning A New Routine. Reading the Sermon on the Mount a Little Bit at a Time (2012)

Lent for Non-Lent People: 33 Things to Give up for Lent and Other Readings (2013)

A Great Work: A Conversation With Nehemiah For People (Who Want To Be) Doing Great Works (2013)

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Saint John of the Mall: Reflections for the Advent Season (2017)

Giving a Life Meaning: How to Lead Funerals, Memorial Services, and Celebrations of Life. (2020)

“God. We Need You”: A Year of Prayer in a Hospital Chapel. (2020)

Before You Walk In: A Devotional Primer for Chaplains and Pastoral Visitors (2020) at beforeyouwalkin.com.

Blogs

300wordsaday.com – I write six days a week about following God. Each Sunday is a prayer.

socialmediachaplain.com – I write regularly about caring for others, particularly in hospitals.