**A season of gratitude, a season of waiting, and a season of light**

***Judith Criscitiello/November 2020***

*No amount of regret changes the past, no amount of anxiety changes the future, any amount of gratitude changes the present. – Ann Voskamp*

One year, when Mack and I were living on our own, we ended up spending our Thanksgiving time alone because of logistics and timing.

I was feeling stressed leading up to that holiday, because I wanted to give him a traditional experience with family, lots of food, and so on. I finally decided that traditional was not going to work, and we needed different plans. We ended up taking our Thanksgiving dinner in the form of a picnic with turkey sandwiches to the beach. It was a wonderful day (fun and relaxing!) – and is one of my favorite holiday memories.

I’ve been thinking a lot about that in recent weeks, because this year is giving us challenges of an unimaginable nature. Even though I’ve had times when I had to think creatively about how to celebrate holidays, either with Mack, or on my own, we still had plenty of opportunities to spend time with family and friends. But this year is different, and I’m realizing that once again, I need to be inspired about planning the upcoming holiday season.

I find it helpful to think about a way of being, something to focus on that leads me in a positive direction, especially when things are stressful. So, I’ve been thinking about the upcoming months as three seasons, and for each season, I’ve come up with a point of focus. This is what I want to share with you tonight.

**Season 1:**

**Thanksgiving: Season of Gratitude**

* I’ve decided to not think of Thanksgiving as one day, rather, to spend the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving focused on gratitude.
* I think many people acknowledge gratitude on Thanksgiving, maybe sharing one or two points of gratitude with others before Thanksgiving dinner. And I think it is a very good practice to think regularly and deeply about the things in your life for which you are grateful. But I’m going to encourage you to think more expansively about gratitude, including:
	+ Spending time thanking others:
		- This could be acknowledging others in your village – family members and friends who are a regular part of your life. Maybe this is thanking your spouse for unfailingly taking care of some otherwise thankless task, or a sibling for helping out with aging relatives, or even your kids, for bringing humor into your day.
		- This could be towards people you may not know well – the coworker who stepped up to help you with an awkward ZOOM meeting, or a healthcare worker who took extra time to be reassuring towards you or someone you love.
		- It could be someone you don’t know at all – the Amazon delivery person, who brings packages to you every couple of days so you don’t have to go to the store, the recycling and trash collectors, or your neighborhood’s postal worker.
* And also, expressing gratitude can be about:
	+ Expressing grace and compassion towards yourself. This can be through:
		- Self-recognition – all of our lives have been turned upside down since March. It’s easy to focus on the disruptions, losses, and frustrations. Take some time to think about all of the tiny successes you have had. You’ve been keeping yourself and others afloat during a pandemic for months now, so surely there are some! Write a list and refer to it when things are getting you down. Or:
		- Self-forgiveness – forgiving yourself for not getting to all of the things you thought you would, with all this “extra” time. Forgive yourself for not always being patient, or creative, or motivated – this time is difficult. And forgive yourself if you just don’t feel like celebrating right now. The pandemic is hard enough, but putting it on top of life’s other difficulties is really challenging. Or:
		- Self-nurturing – try to set aside a bit of time to take care of yourself during the holidays – this can be through trying to keep up with exercising, eating as healthily as you can manage, or going to bed a little bit earlier. It’s REALLY hard to keep doing for others if you don’t take care of yourself, and it’s REALLY hard to take care of yourself if you don’t take care of yourself!

**Season 2:**

**Christmas: Season of Waiting**

We are fortunate! – as members of St. Paul’s, we have both the spiritual guidance and a community with whom to celebrate the season of Advent into Christmas, a season of waiting.

But we are also waiting for other things: for a vaccine, for the pandemic to end, for political changes, for life to evolve into a more familiar version of itself AND for a lot of things that need to change. This is a lot of waiting with unknown end-points, and it is not easy.

Years ago, I went to a counselor to help me get through some difficult life events. There were some things that just had to work themselves out over time, and that was hard. At the time I was a working, single mother, stressed, strapped for money, and uncertain about a lot of things in my life.

She gave me one of the best pieces of advice I have gotten: do something that feeds your soul every day.

 I mentioned earlier that I like to have something to focus on that leads me in a positive direction, especially when things are difficult. So, I did as she suggested. Some days it was a very tiny thing indeed, but I did it.

Over time, I found that I began to learn more about myself, I rediscovered interests that had fallen fallow, and I began to rediscover joy, one tiny little step at a time.

**Season 3:**

**Winter: Season of Light**

At the last Spiritual Spa night, someone spoke of the beginning of the pandemic in the spring, and it was so stressful but the days were getting longer, and the weather, more favorable. She mentioned how difficult it feels to her, now that the numbers are going up again, at a time when the days are getting shorter and the weather, for many, a lot less favorable.

I’ve been thinking about that a lot. I love winter, and what I really love about winter is the light. I know it sounds crazy to say that at a time when the days are so short, but for me, it’s true. This is what I look forward to in winter:

Every year, I look forward to when it’s dark enough to have candlelight breakfasts.

I spend time outside every day. Sunrise and sunset are the most beautiful times, especially in winter. Observing the sky at about the same time every day, over time, makes you notice subtle changes in color and light that you could otherwise miss.

I practice yoga in front of the wood stove with only the firelight.

I even have an alarm clock that wakes me with a soft light that gradually brightens, to simulate sunrise.

These are things I love to do, but I realize they don’t work for everyone.

Maybe you can’t or don’t want to go outside. Find the window in your house with the most beautiful view available, and spend a couple of moments looking, really looking, outside at around the same time of day, every day. See what you see.

Or make a reminder to yourself to track the time at sunset (and while you’re at it, check out the sunset from your window!).

Have dinner or breakfast by candlelight. If that does not seem safe (kids, pets), then try battery operated votive candles – they flicker like real ones!

Try to light a fire in the fireplace once a week, or if you don’t have a fireplace, light a bunch of candles. Turn off the artificial lights and enjoy the glow.

The point is not to try to make everyone love winter, because for some, that just isn’t going to happen! The point is to find some soulful and beautiful way to put some joy into the season.

Gratitude, waiting, and light: This is my road-map through the next few months that I’ve shared with you. I’m finding that the more I think about it, the more I realize these intertwine, and each season helps the other. Maybe some of it will speak to you, maybe it won’t. I encourage you to make your own map, to really put some thought into it, so that you can make the upcoming months not just time to endure, but time to savor.

***Blessed are you who bear the light, by Jan Richardson***

***Blessed are you***
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and grief.

***Blessed are you***
in whom
the light lives,
in whom
the brightness blazes—
your heart
a chapel,
an altar where
in the deepest night
can be seen
the fire that
shines forth in you
in unaccountable faith,
in stubborn hope,
in love that illumines
every broken thing
it finds.

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