



153: Keep Advent Simple (with Tsh Oxenreider)

I'm Emily P. Freeman. And welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 153. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer and a simple next right step.

In today's episode, I'm sharing about one holiday season decision I've already made, and I have a special guest to share the news with. But before we start, a word about today's sponsor, stamps.com. This year we've had to cut back on the normal errands of our everyday lives, including making trips to buy a book or stamps or drop off a package to send to a friend or customer. With stamps.com, you can bring the post office into your home or office with the click of a button. Stamps.com allows you to print postage on demand from your own device to send through the United States Postal Service or UPS. Just weight your package, print your postage, leave it for your mail carrier or schedule a pickup. It's that simple. And you'll never have to run out of stamps again, so you can keep up your offline correspondence with friends and family out of town or down the street.

Earlier this year, I used stamps.com to ship 25 curated gift boxes to a mastermind cohort on behalf of Hope Writers. The process could not have been more simple, and I was able to weigh the boxes, print the shipping labels and get them out the door without a hitch. And I even saved some money. It was so easy that I will forever sing the praises of stamps.com. And just in time for the holiday season, The Next Right Thing listeners can get a special offer that includes a four-week trial plus free postage and a digital scale without any long-term commitment or contracts. Simply visit stamps.com, click the microphone at the top and type Next Right Thing. That stamps.com and enter Next Right Thing. Now, onto today's episode, listen in.

Lately, my morning routines have been a slight trash heap and I've been working to get back to a rhythm that I can depend on. I learned about myself a long time ago that I do a lot better with rhythms than with rules, and one thing that helps me keep them is to always have something to read. In a year where planning ahead feels like something we did in the Dark Ages and making plans for the future is like a unicorn myth, I'm so glad to have already chosen a book that I plan to read during Advent this very year. The book is called *Shadow and Light*, and it's written by my dear friend, Tsh Oxenreider, who I'm so pleased is joining me today. Hi, Tsh.

Tsh:
Hello. How are you?

Emily:
I'm so great. It's lovely to have you here with me. Thanks for joining me on the podcast that usually doesn't have guests.

Tsh:
I know. I feel like the tables have turned, up on turntables.

Emily:
My, how the turns have tabled. I love it so much. Tsh, this book, first of all, is so beautiful and I just want to have a copy in every room of my house.

Tsh:
I know. I was just telling Kyle, my husband, the other day, how do we frame a book? Is that a thing? Because it's so pretty. I love it.

Emily:
It's so lovely. It's lovely and it also already gets me in kind of the Christmasy, Adventy mood because of the way that it looks and is presented. Which is quite a feat, especially since you know how they say don't judge a book by its cover, but we all do, and I did, and it passed the test.

Tsh:
Yes.

Emily:
Thank you for having great taste. I'm curious, Tsh. You know, we talk on *The Next Right Thing* about decision-making and often, especially this time of year, it comes down to decision fatigue. And I'm curious if you could share a little bit about, in what ways has observing Advent helped to ease your holiday decision fatigue?

Tsh:
Well, Advent is a really old tradition in the global church and it's one that's stood the test of time because what it does is that it provides scaffolding to mark our time. That is actually the spirit of the entire liturgical calendar, and is the new year of a liturgical calendar. And so for me personally, the idea of it being a gift that helps me add the scaffolding to are otherwise kind of, tends to be chaotic lives, is the gift that I need.

Emily:
And the thing I also really appreciate about Advent is that it's not a prescription. There's not a set things you're required to do here. It's very much a customizable "do what works best for you and your family during the holidays" kind of thing. And so for me, it's evolved over the years. Back when I first became interested in learning more about the liturgical calendar, my oldest was in first grade and now she's in high school. And so it's evolved because that's how our time structure has worked, and so I'm grateful for it

and I'm grateful for its customization.

Emily:

I'm so grateful for that too. And I love how, gosh, you have been observing Advent... What do you say, observing, practicing, doing?

Tsh:

I think observing is probably the right verb there.

That feels right. I like observing.

Tsh:

Yeah.

Emily:

Since your oldest was so little, so little, and now she's so big.

Tsh:

Yes.

Emily:

But I'm curious, can you look back and remember, what was the... and maybe you can't, I'll put you on the spot. But can you think of a year where it was like this was the most basic observance of Advent because this year was crazy or whatever the thing was? Can you think of a time when it was like, we just did this one thing and it was really life-giving?

Tsh:

Yeah, and the reason I say that is because I went through the opposite for several years before that to where I remember, specifically Christmas 2013, I looked at Kyle and I said, "Is it wrong that I kind of want to take next year's holidays off? Altogether, can we just like skip Christmas? Is that a thing?" And the reason is because all those years beforehand when I was trying to make this "work", it's because I was doing too much, especially when I have little kids.

I laugh at myself now, but I know I had good intentions. I wanted to create these memories and these traditions for my kids to look back on fondly and want to pass on to their own families. I put this huge boulder of pressure on me and my shoulders as though that was up to me. Instead recognizing that, oh, honestly, what we all remember about our childhood holidays is how our homes felt, not the specifics of what we did. And so my chief end should be to create a space more than to do this checklist.

It's kind of a cheater answer because it's not easily replicable, but I think the lessons I learned can be applied. It is the year we traveled around the world, living out of backpacks. And I know that is not a thing-

Emily:

It's very relevant for this year. Tsh, thank you for the tip.

Tsh:

Well, sure, no problem. Yeah, I know. We can all do that. But truly living out of a backpack meant we had like three t-shirts and it meant we weren't going to do much for Christmas because we literally couldn't. And so we decided let's do Advent, but let's pair it way the heck down. And that honestly was the impetus to Shadow and Light, because Shadow and Light is so simple. It is literally reading a psalm, talking about it, lighting a candle, listening to a song and looking at some art, if you want.

And so we honestly, those are what five things, we every day would say let's pick two of those things. And so there were some days we played a song. There were some days we read a psalm out loud and we didn't talk about it because we were too tired. There were other days we just lit a candle. And that was so life-giving because we realized how little is "needed". Not to be all like touchy-feely, but it really is about how it feels in our homes. And so that's the whole lesson I learned from not having a home, that it was about creating, marking time with sensory input, as opposed to a checklist.

Emily:

We did a series a few months ago about paying attention to our senses and how that can help us make more soulful or more informed decisions. And when I first started that series, I was like, "I mean, this might work." You know how it is when you like have an idea and then you have to kind of do it to know if it actually makes sense, but it really did make sense. And it really did help me as I got touch with my own self, touch and smell and how things feel in the room.

I am fully on board for the experience of Advent and paying attention to how it feels and not... I mean, definitely sensory and our five senses, but also kind of how it feels to you on the inside as a human person. Because this time of year, I mean, I don't even know what this year will hold this time of year. It's going to be really different for so many people, but it already has that pull apartness to it just because of the culture that we live in, so this idea of being gathered and having a small plan.

Which as you said, Tsh, you are not kidding, this is a very simple book. And the cover is deceiving because it's so intricate and beautiful. But you get inside and the beauty is in the simplicity of it, which I'm so grateful for.

One thing I wanted to ask you about, because this is something that I, as I paid attention during that time of paying attention to my five senses, one piece that you include in everyday because... So just for the reader, if you don't have Tsh's book yet, Shadow and Light, every day essentially she gives you a reading. And like she mentioned, there's a practice, a reflection and there's also some art, there's a song. And I love this piece of it, and the fact that you include music and art in this is such a beautiful way of experiencing Advent, but also just of experience our lives. I'm curious if you have found that to be true, not just maybe at Advent, but just in your life in general when it comes to... Well, in what ways has music played a part in your own sense of being gathered?

Tsh:

There's this ancient practice... Well, I say ancient, it's an old practice, or maybe it's more like a mindset, that I have become aware of in particular in 2020 with all that it is, and it's called a domestic monastery

and it's a way of thinking about your home. It's a way of reorienting your mind to think of what you do in your home being a place of sacredness, because all a monastery is as a special place. It's a set apart place. And so there's been a lot of great writers who have talked about this concept of a domestic monastery, but I've taken it a little bit of a step further to think about what does my inward monastery look like?

And that's basically my mind and my heart and my soul and my gut, all the inner things, and just become much more cognizant of that this year, because we don't have these outward distractions. We don't have these things to kind of drown out the noise. We have to sit with it a lot more because we don't have the options to travel and to gather and to be just out there. And so I've become aware of how much things like art cultivates that inner monastery and I can tell when I don't get enough of it. It's almost like these are my vitamins for my inward monastery.

If I'm feeling jittery or anxious or just kind of off, to me that's a sign of like, "Oh, I am doing too much doom scrolling and I need to listen to music and read a poem." Or I need to do almost the opposite of what my inclination is because I'm doing too much of that thing that feels like an opportunity to drown out, what I normally can do by just doing the things we do pre 2020. To me, art and music has been that vitamin for an inner monastery. It creates a recalibration of remembrance of what actually matters and what's truly significant.

Emily:

I love that concept of an inner monastery. Have you read *Monastery of the Heart*?

Tsh:

No, I haven't, but it sounds like something I should read.

Emily:

I feel like it's Joan Chittister-

Tsh:

It sounds like her. Oh, I think you're right.

Tsh:

Doesn't it sound like her?

Emily:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Emily:

Yeah, that's good. I love that. Can you see the difference in your family as well? Are your kids that way? Like let's put on some music and it like changes the house. I feel like it's that way at my house.

Tsh:

100%. Especially because we've been home so much more, I can tell if everyone's just kind of snippy at each other. I will play some kind of music on our Sonos speaker. I'll pull up a Spotify playlist, like fall classical music or just something that's like that sounds calming, and I will hit play. And it seems like there's some sort of pinprick and the air is released a little bit. I'm not saying it's like this magic thing, but it kind of feels like it sometimes. Or, I mean, lighting a candle. Or, I mean, just there's all these sensory things that I think we don't realize how powerful they are, and they're so simple. Yes, 100% to music.

Emily:

It's so good. It reminds me that this does not have to be fancy. And I think when I first learned about... I mean, I didn't really grow up in church that observed Advent. It was more Mother's Day, Christmas Eve, maybe we had a Christmas Eve service. I don't remember, but I think we might have. But it just all kind of happened right there on the day. And so when I began to learn about, "Oh, there's a church calendar. That's a whole thing," it felt complicated at first.

But I think that over the years, as more of us have become more familiar with it and as writers like you have taken the time to write some things down and provide a guide, it's been so life-giving for me to do, exactly what you said, which is maybe in some ways let's pretend like we're going around the world for a year and pairing it down to simplify. Because, man, if there's ever a time when I need to simplify my decision-making, it is this year, today, this moment, I feel like. This idea of having a simple guide, especially heading into a season where we really want it to be meaningful. And it's been a year of a lot of loss, and so this idea of let someone else pre-decide for you what you're going to read during Advent, Tsh has done that work for us, which I'm so grateful for.

Tsh, I'm curious, I have a little behind-the-scenes question.

Tsh:

Okay.

Emily:

And as we wrap up our conversation, it is true or false, is this the book you were writing when we were in London in the heat of summer?

Tsh:

Yes. And it was the weirdest thing. Because sometimes people, usually those who know the book writing process, will ask me, "So what was it like to write it?" I wrote this book during Lent, which is such a head scratcher. It's like, it's so weird, so weird. I was telling Kyle, my husband, I'm not going to have a normal Advent for like three years, I think.

Emily:
No, yeah.

Tsh:
And that's okay. But yes, I was writing it in the heat of summer in London. I mean, and I would have to mentally put my head on, okay, pretend like it is early December and I am being thrown with all these Christmas party invitations, how do I feel right now? What psalm do I want to read and how do I want to reflect on it? Go. It felt really weird, but that's the work we do I guess. And this is my first time writing a time-specific book so it was definitely trippy. But it's done now, so I'm glad I did it and I went with it.

Emily:
As you thought about, because I mean I have never spent a significant amount of time thinking about the Christmas story or any of that in July. But I'm wondering, was there any unique insights that you found doing it on the off season that maybe you wouldn't have noticed?

Tsh:
Yeah. I think it's funny that we associate certain events in the New Testament with our own calendars, where we have really no reason for that if you think about it. We don't know exactly when Jesus was born. I mean, it was most likely the spring, right? And so it's funny how we overlay our ideas of what happened when.

I will tell you, I think for me, I've been doing a lot of just reflections and prayers ever since then about the gospels in particular. And so the story of Mary's Magnificat and her going to see your cousin, Elizabeth, all these things just keep coming up again and again, and I think I really appreciate so much more the invitation to reflect on the Holy Family and what that must have been like in the day-to-day. I think it's easy to kind of separate them as like the nativity scene that we put out once a year and somehow that gives us this mindset to focus specifically on the birth and what that was like.

And reading it frequently, I think I've been thinking a lot more about the day-to-day like what was it like to parent Jesus? How weird would that have been? If you're sitting around the table and you know that he didn't sin, so it was Joseph that did that thing. I don't know, it's silly. But yeah, thinking about what was the day-to-day of living with Christ like? I think that was a gift that I didn't see coming in writing this book, this holiday-specific book throughout an entire calendar year.

Emily:
What a beautiful gift. Now I'm going to be thinking about, when must Jesus really born? It makes me think of that, didn't you spend Christmas in Australia one year?

Tsh:
Yes, and that was trippy too. I mean, that's what I thought of actually a lot of times when I was writing this. Like, "Oh, this is like when we went to the beach," literally, the day after Christmas. That was weird.

But I mean, it's summer there, it makes sense.

Emily:

It makes sense. Tsh, thank you so much for joining me on The Next Right Thing. I have one final question, what's your next right thing?

Tsh:

My next right thing is to continue to teach my high school students great literature, meaning this is a work that I've been doing for several years now that I had no idea it would be as life-giving as it is. Because like the liturgical calendar, it gives me some scaffolding to mark my time. And so whenever you and I work in such a project-based sort of world writing books, to show up and just do the next thing in front of me, which is like, "Oh, today we're going to be discussing these chapters of this great work." It has been a gift to live more present and be local because it's these few kids in my life. That's my next right thing. I'm going to, next week, just get back up to teaching my kids.

Emily:

I love it. I love that next right thing. Thank you, Tsh. It's been such a pleasure to have you.

Tsh:

Thank you, friend. I appreciate it.

Thanks for listening to Episode 153 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this practice of keeping your Advent simple this year can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find a transcript of this and every episode at thenextrightthingpodcast.com. And you can find me at emilypfreeman.com and at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman) on Instagram. If you want to grab your own copy of *Shadow and Light* by Tsh Oxenreider, visit tshoxenreider.com/advent or anywhere books are sold. And you'll see the beautiful cover and you'll get yourself a copy and maybe even a stack to hand out because this book is so lovely.

One more thing I want to tell you about a newish show on the That Sounds Fun Network, it's The Matthew West Podcast. Matthew is a Christian musician, singer/songwriter and creative, who's on a mission to share the inspirational stories of artists, athletes, authors, and more. He sat down with people like Mark Hall from Casting Crowns, author Max Lucado and Olympian Shawn Johnson East. Once a month, he gives a behind-the-scenes look at his creative process and tells the powerful stories behind the music in a VIP Q&A episode, which will be familiar to you if you've ever attended one of his concerts.

His show launched in August of this year, and I'm delighted to share a network with him. Matthew is a thoughtful interviewer and passionate about inspiring others, and I think you'll really enjoy his show. Being part of a network helps offset the cost of producing *The Next Right Thing*, but it also helps us discover new voices and shows that could be the perfect addition to our podcast listening routines. Why don't you try out *The Matthew West Podcast*, new episodes drop on Wednesday mornings.

Well, in closing, here are a few words from Tsh and her introduction in her book *Shadow and Light*:

“Advent is a gift. It’s an invitation to move slowly and methodically, looking inward and with honesty about your relationship with God incarnate. it doesn’t matter where you begin your Advent journey. What matters is that you’re invited.”

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.