



254: Honest Advent with Scott Erickson

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 254.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, with 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 discerning your Next Right Thing. Today I'm glad to welcome back to the show author, artist, and spiritual director, Scott Erickson. He's here to talk about one of my favorite advent resources, his beautiful book, *Honest Advent*. This is the third advent season since *Honest Advent* has been in the world, and I have to say, I now can't imagine advent without it. I read it last year and of course, I didn't finish it in time for Christmas, but I just kept right on reading through the new year, finishing it up in the middle of January, and I wasn't a bit mad about it. I hope you enjoy my honest conversation with Scott Erickson. Listen in.

Emily:

Well, welcome back Scott. It's so good to have you here.

Scott Erickson:

Great to be with you, Emily.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, the first time you came was about a year ago and it was episode 209. If y'all haven't listened to it, you can go back and listen to it, but it was about finding life beyond the death of a dream. And as we get started, I'm springing this one on you, I would love if you could just say a few words about how that's played out for you in the last year. I mean this finding life beyond the death of a dream situation since we last spoke.

Scott Erickson:

Well, life has an interesting way of being cyclical, or cylindrical, sometimes I think we say starting over mentally, because I'm an image guy, sometimes I think we think, well I go back down to a bottom and I got to climb the staircase again. But actually, this is in my book, *Say Yes*. I actually think, what if we thought of it as cylindrical like you're going up a staircase? And yeah, you've come back around to this same spot, but with a whole new wealth of experiences and thoughts and insights and stuff. Since last time we talked, I moved again, which was unexpected. My oldest son went through unexpected multiple eye surgeries and is continuing to work through that. I had to tear down my studio and then restart it again and we were just chatting about and even doing that, I'm like, "Well, I don't know if it's the one I want in my garage. I think I want something more." So even I find myself as a 45 year old creative going, "What is it that I do and how do I want to do it?"

I've been self-employed for about seven, eight years and have wanted a sabbatical, although nobody's going to pay my bills, I'll just have to save up. And I think in a way, the universe, the divine, the sacred gave me the kind of unexpected and unplanned sabbatical the last, since June, because I was forced to stop through exhaustion, circumstances, at least with my work, and have had to just kind of pay attention to what kind of moves are happening interiorly as well as exteriorly. I spend a lot of time just moving boxes around in 100 degree Austin heat and then in Northwest weather. I feel like the best way to just say it is there are days you wake up and you're like, all of this is unexpected. I just didn't...

The death of a dream. A dream is a version of your life without any vulnerabilities. When we imagine when we dream about a situation or a scenario, we never bring our weaknesses and limitations to it because that doesn't sound dreamy, but that's the only way that we can be in our lives is with our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, limitations. Vulnerability I think is less about those weaknesses and limitations and more about our relationship with them because I think our relationship with our vulnerabilities usually begins, or as an adult, is like, "Oh, these are the things that are in the way of me getting to a life that I want." And I have found, and through Say Yes, the book and the show and stuff, was kind of a contemplative processing of maybe they are the way, maybe actually the way forward is in weaknesses and limitations. These are the things that actually connect you to this desire that's calling your name.

So I was meeting with my spiritual director and discussing my son's surgeries and these things and he's just like, "Well, you've been made very vulnerable." And I was like, "Yeah." And that's always the recipe for transformation. So if you're like, "I want to be transformed," I think sometimes when we pray, God, please change my life, we don't know the cosmic strategies that start to get put in place. Mostly change isn't going to come through you killing it, it's going to come through the armor being taken off where the tears are kind of really close to coming out all the time. Yeah, those are the ingredients for transformation, I've found.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, I have unfortunately found that to be also true. I wish I could disagree with you, but unfortunately I cannot. Well, it's a lovely segue because speaking of vulnerability, when I think about the season we are in, heading into, the season of advent, maybe vulnerability isn't the first word that comes to mind, but in reading your advent devotional now, at least one Christmas, how long has it been out? Since 2020?

Scott Erickson:

Yeah, 2020. So this is the third year that it's out.

Emily P. Freeman:

So I feel like you are teaching us that that word is very relevant in this season. But before I ask you how or force you to tell us how, I'm curious just for my own self, and maybe someone listening might also be curious, but when you write an advent book, I would love to know, what did you read before you wrote your own? Who were your teachers in this area of observing this season?

Scott Erickson:

My wife's biology. That was my teacher. It was around 2016, if we can even remember, there was a divisive and really intense political election year, presidential year. There was Syria was really bad, Zika virus, Flint water crisis. And then all of a sudden we came into Christmas time and it's like, you walk into a Walgreens or a CVS and you're like, it's November and Christmas, oh yeah, Christmas and it's like that, peace on earth and all this stuff. And I was like, man, this brand feels really off or feels like it's not about anything we're going through right now. And I just was like, does it have anything to say about the reality I live in? Or is Christmas advent just kind of an escapist, delusional kind of festival?

But then I was witnessing my wife who was in her third pregnancy, she's got it, but there's the sickness and the heartburn and there's lots of fluids. And then witnessing that birth, I just was like, wow, it is

beautiful and magical and really precious and I'm thankful for having witnessed those times. It's also really painful and risky. You get checkups and you're like, "Hey, we got to see what kind of pregnancy this is and could there be complications?" And we live in a pretty modern society, but even birthing can cost the life of a mother and it's all very risky and vulnerable and it's joyous and scary at the same time.

And that really, as a man who doesn't have the gear for all of that, just paying attention to what I was like, well this is the way that God, the divine incarnated in the world, which was through human vulnerability. And I was like, maybe if Christmas advent, these contemplations have something to do about today, maybe they're coming through those same avenues, the places where we feel vulnerable about the unknowness and the mystery of life, about our fragility, about our limitations, about complex family dynamics. I started doing these Instagram posts, I mean one was really short, then I had to make it into 1,000 word essay. But one was just at a time the presence of God felt like morning sickness and so maybe if you feel like throwing up, maybe that's the presence of God in your life. It's just something simple like that. Maybe the place of unease in your life right now is the presence of God. It's just kind of these invitations into these things.

And then as an artist, I looked at all the art around this time and it's mostly done by men, so it's all very sanitized and I understand why we make things, in giving reverence to something, we clean it up a little bit, we put some gold leaf on it, we are saying this was holy. But in that process we remove ourselves who are still in this very biological, fragile, fluid filled reality and going, "Well, can I partake in divine happenings?" For me it was all visual and then it was kind of this embodiment and going, how does it feel to be embodied? What is the risk of being embodied in the world? And really understanding that Jesus, the story of Jesus' birth is the story of risking embodiment?

Emily P. Freeman:

I'm sitting in silence because it's one thing to say embodiment is a risk and then it's another thing to sit here in my own body in a day following a weekend that was filled with some anxiety and some goodbyes, and I feel that in my body. I don't just think it, I'm not just thinking it in my head, I'm feeling it in my body and the way to get it out, I'm learning, is I can't think my way out of this, whether it's anxiety or fear or sorrow or grief, that I'm realizing even just today, even before our conversation, I met with my own spiritual director who we love and also sometimes don't love, but I'm realizing I'm going to have to live my way through this in my body.

We don't get to go outside of our body and experience a thing and then come back and tell our bodies about it. That's not how this works. And I just think it... But it started with the incarnation. This is all connected, Scott, and I think that it almost makes me glad to know that for you, it started embodied by witnessing Holly's pregnancies and then it didn't even go to words, it then went to imagery and then it went to words because that's how people receive books these days is with words. So is why Honest Advent? You were tired of the dishonest, if you will, dishonesty of maybe some of the ways that the incarnation of Christ has been portrayed through time and history?

Scott Erickson:

Yeah. I mean I was working with Stephanie Smith, she was my editor on this, so we didn't know what the title was going to be and she pitched me that and it took me, I thought it was a little clunky at first, just Honest Advent, but then it really worked. And it makes sense as an Enneagram four and authenticity. I got into it, I was like, "Yeah, it is about just what..." Let's look at this. There's a Russian literary term called *ostranenie*, and it means the art of making that which is familiar unfamiliar again. And as a person who really loves Christmas, I'm in for the whole thing, I had to do the work of confronting all the cliches, confronting the brand, confronting all the jingles and just go, "What?" And then juxtaposing that with what I was witnessing and then going, before we made a song about it, what did it feel like to live it? And could we relate to that at all? And that was the work that I had to do. And that felt really, yeah, honest.

So it's just being like... And I knew I needed to kind of sidestep this juggernaut of a brand because people in Australia celebrate Christmas, but the brand of Christmas, which is the north and snow, Christmas in the southern hemisphere is in the summer and I had people tell me, they're like, "Yeah, we'll put Christmas trees in our house and we'll put icicles but it'll be 100 degrees outside." It's a strong brand, so I knew I needed... I started making imagery that had nothing to do with that brand. I was like, "I need to just come up with a different visual vocabulary to sidestep this to get to a different kind of conversation about what these stories were pulling out of us."

For me, I think one of the reasons we still tell these old stories is because when we tell those stories, we are helping us see that we're in the same stories right now. And my real heart was just to go, I think I say this in the book, I was like, "Is Christmas a memorial service or is it a birthday party?" If it's a memorial service, it's like, remember when that happened that one time, that was cool. But if it's a birthday party, it means it's still going on today and if you ask any kid in any Sunday school pageant, they're like, whose birthday it is? They're like, it's Jesus's birthday. So it's saying it's still happening today and I guess all of us who are spiritual seekers or pilgrims are kind of like, where is this happening today? And my interest became in, maybe I could use, these old stories could help me see that they're still happening today.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well it's funny you said that because I'd written down to ask you about this one line you said about all of our sacred liturgies and services are just the visible mechanics that help us to get to the invisible essence of the love of God. And so in some ways, this practice that you invite us into with *Honest Advent*, with the imagery, it's like another liturgy offering of putting us in the path of God's love. I assume that that's still true about even something like a book. When you think about liturgy, we think about an order of service or something that people do to practice repeatedly to remember a thing, but I think the same can be true for a book we return to.

Scott Erickson:

Yeah, absolutely. My friend, Justin McRoberts, and I made a couple books on prayer, images and words, really simple, but when we were discussing it, and he gave a bit of this, but how we fleshed it out was like, prayer is not the words or images or songs. Prayer is the deep interior ever-present conversation you're having with God that gets pinged because of the words or the images or song. My fun example is always like, have you ever turned on the radio and you're like, "Oh, this is my song," and you turn it up and you sing along? What are you saying there? What you're saying is somehow the artist lyrically and sonically perfectly described what it feels like to be in your own skin in this moment, and it becomes a vehicle for honesty, it becomes a vehicle to approach God to be like, "This is how I feel about life right now," or, "This is what I wish about life," or, "This is what I dream," or, "This is my sadness about it."

And that's why I make seasonal playlists but people are like, "What are you listening to?" I'm always like, "10 songs over and over and over again." I love Taylor Swift's new album, but I'm listening to *Midnight Rain* over and over and over again because it hits something in me and it's paying attention to what that's hitting. That's my deepest prayer. It's whatever is catching, you're like, "This is hitting that."

So our image is a can of tuna and we're like, prayers are the can opener and that is getting past the casing of ego and fear and the noise of life and what prayer is that thing that's in the inside. How are we getting to the inside? Because we can get out of touch with that conversation about how we really feel about or what we really think about being here or what we're really saying to God. So yeah, this book is using the stories of this time. My favorite endorsement is from my friend, Hillary McBride, because she's like, "It's not really a Christmas book, it's just a book about life and you're using these Christmas stories." And I was like, "Exactly." And that's what all these seasons are for. These seasons are to be like, here's these certain sacred stories and they help us get in touch with the interior conversations we're having. That's

why when we hear good words or good music and we go, well it's pinging that thing in us that is the honest and true conversation.

Emily P. Freeman:

When you said the thing about the song, the song would be playing whether you turn the radio on or not. So when you talk about prayer, because we always think about prayer as conversation, but to think about prayer as the access to the conversation that's always happening.

Scott Erickson:

Yes. Have you ever read a section of scripture and you underlined a certain part of it and then two years later you come back to it and you're like, "Oh yeah, this part now. I want to underline this part." Well did the words change? No, you changed. What it's reflecting or mirroring or pinging in you is what we should be paying attention to. Yeah.

Emily P. Freeman:

I love this, Scott, because it's turning on the light in the room of our inner lives, which is a room that many of us do not like to go into. But like it or not, here we are. The current is always rushing beneath the surface of our everyday lives and I think what your words are doing, what your images do, what this conversation does is it sort of, we dip down for a minute, we turn on the light, sometimes we're terrified by what we see or don't see, and so we scoot back up to the top.

But I think that the gift in even recognizing for a moment, turn on the light, you look around, you turn the light back off or leave the room, it's like your mind still has the image of what the room was. It's still happening. Spirit still pulses beneath the surface and is there when we're ready. And I think that art often allows us access points that maybe other ways in are too scary or intimidating or we can't access it that way.

Scott Erickson:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I always encourage people to pay attention to what's getting your attention. Because that is signaling what's happening or what God is doing. And I know you, because of spiritual direction training and practice, what really shifted for me was understanding that spirituality is not about getting God's attention, it's about awakening to where God's already at work in your life. So it's not this like, "I got to sit down and pray today so that God will pay attention to me." It's like, no, am I going to take time to go, "What could God be doing? Where am I not noticing it? What am I too distracted in?" I mean argumentatively I would say that's our deepest desire is that connection.

My favorite story in the Christmas story, one of them is the Magi for the point of, was it a star in the sky that made them go, "Let's go on an unknown adventure with no air conditioning and bandits and stuff to go maybe find a baby somewhere thousands of miles away?" What happened in the Magi is deep inside of them, they had this desire to know the creator and the maker of everything. And these men and women had this deep desire and they'd asked in secret or even out loud and said, "I want to know you. How can I find you?" And then they were given an external pattern that reflected the internal pattern that was already in there. And I think the invitation for me, is where is the divine offering external patterns that speak to the internal pattern and are leading me into that path of bringing those things together? That's a great invitation. That's why we can have songs and images and movie clips and interactions and stuff and go, "That was so unexpected but deeply meaningful." It's because the lover of our lives is weaving external and internal things together.

Emily P. Freeman:

It's like a love symphony and it's always happening, not to be too dramatic, but it is. It is always happening. You mentioned the Magi and I have been thinking about the story about their way back and how it came to them in a dream not to go back the way they came. And I've held that for a while and

thought, well did they all have the same dream? Did they all dream simultaneously the exact same? Did one of them tell the other? How did this play itself out? And then the courage that it took for them to... I mean these were people of science, for them to take something that they saw, heard, experienced in a dream and have it change their course going back to go against the powers and the systems that were in place at probably great danger and risk to them.

And I'm like, wow, they sensed a red flag and they heeded it. And I think you're speaking of invitations, invitations to love and then also invitations to trust our own inner voice in situations where maybe we don't have a lot of practice. So I say all of that in a side tangent just to maybe reiterate your point of these stories are happening now, these are invitations for us every day and ways that we might not, as you said, might not expect. It can be kind of maddening but also lovely.

I'm curious, it's been three years since *Honest Advent* came out the first time, possibly you revisit it every year, maybe you don't, I don't know how that works. Just any art, any work that we do, I mean is there something that in your mind that you would do differently now? Terrible question to ask, I know, but I'm asking it anyway, you're like, yes, or maybe not, but if so, what? And if not, why?

Scott Erickson:

No, no. It's weird to say I'm not arrogant. I think I put together one of the best advent books ever. I've read other people's and I'm like, "This is great," but I just think it's really special. You've written. You know when you write, I would read through it and just be like, "Am I bored of this?" That's always a good, when you're an author, just be like, am I bored of my own voice? And I never get bored. I even read it recently to remind myself that I can be an author, because I felt like I got real clunky with writing and I picked it up and I read it and I was like, "This is... Wow." It got me and I put it together. So I think it's good.

I think the only thing, there's one thing I would change because a couple of the negative stars, which is just this bigger BS. Look, I chosen the book to refer to God. Often I try to say other words for God, but with the pronouns I chose it or they is more biblical, theological, but it wasn't anything trying to argue about gender, we weren't talking about heavenly genitalia. For me, I'm much more of a mystic, which is like when you think you know God, you don't know God. When you, Meister Eckhart's like, "God, rid myself of God." For me, it's an act of humility to go, "I don't understand what a holy mystery is." But some people took it and because they listened to a lot of media propaganda, they made it into some, "You're just trying to fight over." That's just so dumb. And I was like, that wasn't my intention at all. My intention was to be humbled by these stories and to be humbled by seeking an endlessly noble mystery. That's probably the one thing I would change.

Otherwise, it's perfect and I'm waiting for the awards to start rolling in. It's so weird because I almost feel like it's not even mine. I feel very adjacent to it. I think that's the other thing about creativity, which is, I don't think I'm the genius. I don't think I'm... It's like kind of Elizabeth Gilbert talked about this in her famous TED Talk, where it's just like, I'm not the genius, I'm the conduit for something to come through and this work, these insights, these contemplative musings, curiosities, it was for a season and I was willing to say yes to that.

So I actually still have meditations on Advent and I guess the idea is, should you make a second book? I'm like, I don't know. How about I just see? I'm still curious that there's still parts of these stories that I haven't even spent time with. I have one about Zechariah going mute and sometimes it takes intense and long silence before we can find the right things to say. And then I had a musing about Mary when she found out she was going to have a baby, she immediately went to Elizabeth who was pregnant because when you have an angel, when you see an angel and you're like, "Who else has seen an angel?" And you find out your cousin did, you're like, "I got to go talk to her about my angel story." I'm just like, if you saw a heavenly body, you'd be like, "God, who do I talk about this with?" And then

your cousin had, you're like, "I'm going right now. I got to talk to somebody about their angel story too." I just think there's fun things in there still. So...

Emily P. Freeman:

It's funny you said the thing about an award. I have a quote that I heard you say when you were being interviewed somewhere else and you said, "I write books not to get an award, but because I am a haunted person."

Scott Erickson:

That's true.

Emily P. Freeman:

And when you said that I was like, "Oh, that'll preach." I resonate with that. Also, I would like an award, but that's not why we write the books. And so...

Scott Erickson:

Yeah, I know that there are a lot of authors or people who want to be authors on here. I mean I really think, you don't know if it's going to sell, you don't know if it's going to make any money, it most likely won't make any money. But I think there's a couple ways to view of book. But one can be like, what's my accumulated knowledge on everything? I'm so smart, let me put it all down. I don't have that. What I find more inviting is, what's the journey I'd like to go on? What's the transformational journey? And this would be the artifact of that journey. And that's much more of... Then you don't, I mean you care, but then it's less important to you to win an award because what you got out of it was being transformed. That's what you wanted to do. That was really it, for that.

This is a little bit of side note, but it fits in, I just painted at a fundraiser on Friday, live painting versus dead painting, but I used to do that a lot more and it went okay. It was great. It was a fun experience. But I remembered, I was just like, I never apply for contests. You know what I'm saying? I never apply for an art contest or I didn't even applying for grad school, which I never got in, because it was like, "Hey, are you good enough to win this award from judges?" And I was like, "It's hard enough choosing to do this stuff." The reward, the award, is being able to do it. And I don't know if you can see in the back, I have a sign that says I get to, that's the reward. I hate anything that's a competitive thing because I think creativity's already hard enough to choose to say yes to and commit to. The reward is the transformation that comes from that. Yeah.

Emily P. Freeman:

It's already hard enough to be a person. Let's not add things-

Scott Erickson:

That is true.

Emily P. Freeman:

... to make it harder.

Scott Erickson:

That is true.

Emily P. Freeman:

Well, speaking of The Artifact, I would love for you to close this out by reading from it and yeah, this is one of my favorite sections of the book.

Scott Erickson:

Mine too. Mine too. It's in the chapter called Assumptions. "Our assumptions hinder our spiritual journey in all kinds of ways. And the antidote to assumption is surprise. The surprise of Christ's incarnation is that it happened in Mary's day as it is happening every day in your lack of resources, your overcrowded lodging, your unlit night sky, your humble surroundings. It's a surprise that life can come through barren places. It's a surprise that meek nobodies partake in divine plans. It's a surprise that messengers are sent all along the hidden journey of life to let you know you're not alone. It's a surprise that you will be given everything you need to accomplish what you've been asked to do. It's a surprise that nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing can separate you from love. Your assumptions believe there must be something that can but surprise, nothing can. May you thank God with joyful surprise at how much you have assumed incorrectly."

Emily P. Freeman:
Amen. I love it. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Erickson:
It's great being with you, Emily.

Emily P. Freeman:
You too.

Thanks for listening to episode 254 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of getting honest about advent 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, we know the truth really is that our daily decisions are making our lives. You can find Scott online at scottericksonart.com or on Instagram at [scottthepainter](https://www.instagram.com/scottthepainter), where he will daily stop your scroll with either his artwork, his words, or both.

And now is the time, this very week, to get your advent reading resource. I recommend *Honest Advent: Awakening to the Wonder of God-With-Us Then, Here, and Now*. Scott and I have many things in common, but one of them is our mutual fascination and continued respect for the ongoing story of the incarnation. So grab your copy of *Honest Advent* and then, I hope you know what's coming, it's the *Quiet Collection for Christmas* coming soon. If you want to get an email reminder for when my annual audio advent devotional will be ready, click the signup link in the show notes and we'll send that reminder your way when it's time. So you can read Scott's advent book in the morning and then you can listen to the *Quiet Collection for Christmas* in the evening or on your walk or on the go. And then your advent resource decisions are all made. You're welcome.

In closing, here are a few final words from Scott and *Honest Advent*.

"May it be known that the giver of existence took the same risk we all have to take daily, to be seen and known as the person we really are. The risk of incarnation is the risk of love and love risks heartbreak, rejection, and being sold out by your friends because love is also the animating source that brings about all the wonderful things in an incarnation, like companionship, joy, healing, wholeness, and being seen and known in the world. A woman at a well once inquired about this wellspring and Jesus replied, "I offer water that will become a wellspring within you that gives life throughout eternity. You will never be thirsty again." Jesus offered to her what he had received himself. He offers that same wellspring to us today. May you never thirst again at the wellspring waiting inside you."

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