



### **304: For When You Don't Have a Church at Christmas**

]I'm Emily P. Freeman. Welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 304. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family and through my work, I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, in work, and in life.

You are enjoying this podcast ad free because of the generous support of subscribers to The Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more and subscribe at [emilypfreeman.substack.com](http://emilypfreeman.substack.com), and that's where we'll continue the conversation that we start here about discernment and decision-making for anyone who wants to move beyond the pro/con list. 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 discerning your next right thing.

There are a lot of reasons why the season of Advent might be a difficult one for you this year. Among them could be because you don't currently have a church or a faith community or it looks different than it used to, or you're about to move or make a change or you just moved and made a change and it's all impacting your current reality and your feeling some kind of way about it all. If that's you, I hope you'll find welcome in today's conversation. Listen in.

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This is what I know. There may be a thousand reasons why you don't have a church right now. From being brand new to a town, to getting married or divorced, to having babies or graduating, to long-term traveling or displacement, to walking through a season of disentangling and rearranging your inherited views of God from actual God. You name it, someone listening, I'm sure has lived it. The why is important and it deserves to be witnessed and held. You may or may not know that I have my own story of leaving a beloved church, which means we spent several Advent seasons without a place where we felt we fully belonged. Leaving was no small thing. Our church was where we found small group community, communal encouragement, family support and spiritual connection. It's where we offered our time, our money, our many hours of service. It's where we mostly felt at

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home until we didn't. And when you leave, you're out. Perhaps you can relate.

While that is a story I plan to tell, it requires more than a podcast episode, and so I wrote it all down in my next book, *How to Walk Into a Room*, because it matters and it may be your story too. For now, the reasons why you're here could be many, and we need not diagnose or explain them. We simply need to acknowledge that here you are in December, where around every corner is a reminder of holidays past, of how you used to do it, of who used to be there, of what used to be true for you. Here you are without a strategy or a timeline trying to trust in the dark, hoping for some clarity, but having no choice but to settle for the fog.

If you used to have a church but now you don't for whatever reason, the Advent season can be particularly sad as you sit home on Sunday morning or visit unfamiliar spaces or hear O Holy Night in the restaurant and try to order your food without crying, as you passed what used to be your church and see the banner for the Christmas pageant that you used to volunteer for, as you settle into a new apartment or town home or house, knowing that your beloved faith community continues with their Advent rituals states away from where you now live. As you consider the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus and wonder what of it you've missed in years past.

You may not have a church right now, and it's true it's the Advent season and that is a loss that's not easily replaced. Full stop. Still, even as we acknowledge the grief and the absence, it can be good to notice and name what you do have, the beloved communities, the temporary sanctuaries and the simple liturgies. First, the beloved communities. I believe there is that of God in everyone that we bear the image of the divine, a dignity that is not earned but given and bestowed. I also believe in the miracle of the incarnation that Jesus is really human and really God, and I can't say I understand it fully, but I do believe it. I guess that makes me a mystic. Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that Jesus did not write a book but formed a community, a living, breathing, messy, uncontrollable, beloved community, and he invited us and invites us still to commune with each other.

What that looks like for the community he formed? It looked like teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. It looked like meeting together and caring for one another when we had need. It looked like enjoying God and one another. It looks like that still and it can look like that anywhere. Anywhere we are, around a backyard fire, at the family table, in the book club conversation, on the walking trails with a friend. I'm not saying that means you'll be without a church forever, but since you don't have one now, it's good to look around and see the opportunity for community where you are and not where you think you should be. Do you see a beloved community even beyond the walls of the church? And then there are the temporary sanctuaries.

About a year after we left our church, I spoke at a conference at Friends University out in Wichita. I stood in an auditorium with Singing Quakers and stained-glass. Emily P. Freeman: In the piano, Rich Mullins played its baccalaureate. There I was being loved by God, father,

mother, son, friend, teacher, king and Holy Spirit, invited to the table even though it felt borrowed at the time, even though it was temporary. Temporary tables are no less meaningful or holy. We are doubting rebels and stubborn saints and little children on the inside. We're always growing and losing things and wishing something was different and we're always being loved. We're always standing in temporary sanctuaries. Our backyard and the morning sunlight, our comfy chair by the Christmas tree, the front seat of the car in the Target parking lot, the serving line of the soup kitchen, our own kitchen table. Do you see the temporary sanctuaries as you walk the hallways of this in-between time?

Finally, there are the simple liturgies. If there was ever a time when I needed simple liturgies, it was when we didn't have a certain faith place to call home. Doing the next right thing has saved my life over and over again. It can be hard though during Advent because so many of the things you're used to doing in this season are things that used to be determined by your faith community. Now it feels like you're on your own and so it can be good maybe in this season, maybe just for now to begin to engage new liturgies for this space you're in and you get to decide what that looks like. One year I decided to choose one life-giving thing to engage daily on purpose. The rules, I had to do one fun to me thing before 6:00 PM and when I did it, I had to write it down. It was a way of keeping my own promise.

One day it was Thai food for lunch with a 45-minute actual lunch break while watching a Netflix show, probably a Christmas special, and would you believe that day that move for me, it was a simple kind of liturgy, a liturgy of love, something small and regular just for now. Maybe you want to do something more focused in the season, like to choose your own Advent reading or follow along in a reading plan, not for trying to earn any points, don't you dare, but only if it's life-giving in a good way.

Of course, I've told you about the Advent collections in the The Quiet Collection app that we created, where I'll read to you a portion of scripture and a short meditative reflection. We have three Advent collections available now. If you put them all together, you'll have more than one to listen to every day until the end of the year, but there are so many resources for Advent. You've probably heard of them and engaged many of them, Scott Erickson, Sarah Bessey, Kate Bowler, they all have Advent writings friendly for those who may not have a church at Christmas. And so the final question is, what are some simple liturgies you might engage this season that feel life-giving for you for now? In the words of Pastor Leah Shoal, "May we sit still and wait until the deep sigh comes and the next step is possible."

Well, I once heard Shauna Niequist say if she had to narrow down her life to two words, it would be a toast and a prayer. That was many years ago, and I don't know if she would say it the same way now, but I never forgot that she said it then. And so if you don't have a church during Advent for whatever reason it may be, I want to offer you some company by way of a toast and a prayer.

Here's to knowing you are not the only one, even if the people around you seem to have all found their place. Here's to being honest about what is true today. Here's to not looking too far into the future. Here's to the beloved community, the temporary sanctuary and the simple liturgies of your life. Here's to experiencing the life of Christ in new and unexpected ways. Eternal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Mary and Ruth, the one who sees and knows and doesn't need to hear an explanation, be our kind companion as we hold space for the waiting, as we look for the light and as we bear witness to the arrival of the Christ child who is being born in us this day and always, amen.

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Thanks for listening to episode 304 of *The Next Right Thing*. I hope this simple practice of naming the communities, the sanctuaries and the liturgies of this season can be 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 our daily decisions that are making our lives. As always, you can find me online at [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com) or on Instagram at [emilypfreeman](https://www.instagram.com/emilypfreeman).

As I mentioned before, we have three Advent collections ready for purchase in *The Quiet Collection* app that you can find in the App store for iPhone or on the Google Play Store for Android. And if you already have the app, make sure you've checked that you have the latest version so all of the features are available to you. Thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits and mixes our sound and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

Well, since I've already quoted Shauna Niequist once, why not go ahead and have her close us out. Here's a bit from *Reading and Eating*, which is her Substack from a post called *You Don't Have to Know All the Answers Right Now*. "Give it time then more time, then more time. No Great decisions get made out of frantic or fearful places. The next time you pass a church, go in and light a candle. As you do, you're joining a wide, lovely community that spans the globe and the centuries, a community of not knowers, questioners, listeners, mystics, mustard seed believers, pilgrims, humans." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.