

E. E. CUMMINGS AND THE JOYFUL POETRY OF ADVENT





LOVE IS THE VOICE UNDER ALL SILENCES.

+ E. E. CUMMINGS



Edward Estlin Cummings was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894. His father (also Edward, which meant the poet went by "Estlin") was a professor at Harvard University before becoming the minister at South Congregational Church in Boston. Many of Estlin's poems explore spiritual subjects with exuberance and insight.

Though he was personally opposed to the Great War, in 1917 Cummings enlisted in the ambulance corps in France – and because of his anti-war views, he ended up spending three months in a French prison. The experience inspired his first novel, *The Enormous Room*, which F. Scott Fitzgerald hailed as one of the most vital, original works to emerge from the smoldering ruins of the war.

Though his first love was painting, Cummings became widely known as one of the most inventive among a new group of modernist poets, experimenting with syntax, punctuation, and (as a painter would!) visual layout on the page. He spent much of his time living in Greenwich Village in New York City, and spending summers on his family's farm – "Joy Farm" – in New Hampshire. Cummings received a special citation from the National Book Award Committee in 1957, and the Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 1958. At the time of his death in 1962, he was one of the most-read American poets in the world (second only to Robert Frost).





INTRODUCTION

The Christian year begins not with the trumpets of Easter, the rumbling winds of Pentecost, or the carols of Christmas morning. It begins with silence, with the shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow, and hate – for it's there that the God of hope, peace, joy, and love will arrive.

The word "Advent" means arrival. It's the four-week season of waiting and preparing for Jesus to be born, watching and listening for God coming into the world, even now. For God is love, and love, as E. E. Cummings put it, "is the voice under all silences."

Poetry can help tune our ears and eyes so we can listen, and watch, and wait. Poems can push us to think new thoughts and feel new feelings, to hear new songs we might otherwise miss. In this Advent devotional, we let scripture and Cummings' poetry be our guides, together pointing us toward weekly practices that can help deepen and enrich our sense of the season – a perfect way to prepare for the rejoicing of Christmas day.

So grab your favorite Bible and Cummings' *Complete Poems* (the poems in this devotional can also be found online). Week by week, we'll make our way to Bethlehem, listening to the songs and the silences as we go.



TIPS FOR READING CUMMINGS' POETRY

- 1. **BE ENCOURAGED!** Cummings is an inventive, lively, ambitious poet. He often plays with syntax (the order of words), punctuation, spacing, and form in surprising ways and that's the point! So if you don't understand something at first, don't worry. Think of his poems as little experiments meant to stretch your imagination in new directions, opening up new doors. Take your time, and try to read as playfully-yet-seriously as Cummings writes.
- 2. THE POET WAS A PAINTER: As prolific a poet as Cummings was, his first love and the activity to which he devoted much of his time, throughout his life was painting. Even more than most, then, Cummings was interested in how a poem looks on the page, and he often conveyed his ideas through layout and visual design. As you read, pay attention to how the poem appears; think of each one as a painting made with words.
- 3. LET YOUR MIND BEND: Cummings was fascinated with the power of language to bend our minds and hearts, making new ideas and feelings possible. When he writes that love is "less littler than forgive," or that "nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands" don't worry too much about pinning down a precise meaning. Instead, let these mind-bending phrases do their mind-bending work, and see what ideas and feelings arise as you go.
- **4. PICK ONE:** As you walk through a poem, try picking a smaller section a stanza, a line, a phrase that speaks to you, and meditate on it throughout the week. Sometimes a poem as a whole remains mysterious, but a smaller section is radiant, like a candle in a room full of shadows.
- **5. TRY READING OUT LOUD:** Sometimes the simple act of reading aloud can unlock the emotions of a poem, or allow one of its meanings to unfold. So try listening to a poem, feeling it as you read it aloud, and see where that takes you.
- 6. TAKE TWO (OR THREE, OR FOUR...): Many of Cummings' poems have been put to music by composers and songwriters, and virtually all of his poems have a kind of musical quality, designed to be listened to again and again. Think of each one as an open invitation to visit and revisit, always with the possibility of discovering something new.

WEEK ONE: HOPE



LIGHT

One Candle

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 24:36-44 (see inset)

POETRY

"i thank You God for most this amazing," by E. E. Cummings (You can also hear the poet himself read this poem on YouTube!)



Many people read "i thank You God for most this amazing" as a poem set in the lushness of spring or summer – but after all, "the leaping greenly spirits of trees" and "a blue true dream of sky" apply equally well to the evergreen trees and clear, cold days of Cummings' beloved New Hampshire in fall and winter. What's more, the idea of "the sun's birthday" evokes the December solstice, the cosmic underpinning of the Christmas holiday itself.

As that solstice approaches during Advent, Jesus calls us to "keep awake" in the shadows, to keep the "ears of our ears" awake and the "eyes of our eyes" opened – for God is coming into the world. Advent is a season of awakening, of coming to our senses ("tasting touching hearing seeing / breathing") and reviving our hope and wonder in life's exuberance, God's generosity, and the infinite "yes" at the center of it all. Keep awake!

PRAY

God of life and love and wings, thank you for most this amazing day. Be with us in the shadows of despair, anxiety, and grief, and grant us again the gift of hope. Awaken our ears to your amazing grace, and open our eyes to your ongoing arrival. Bring us back to our senses. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.

SING

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

"Come Ye Disconsolate"

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Child, but only God. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Child of Humanity. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Child of Humanity. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

"Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your God is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Child of Humanity is coming at an unexpected hour." + Matthew 24:36-44

DAILY PRACTICES

- Light a candle of wakefulness each morning, and again at your evening meal. Let it be a reminder to "keep awake" this week to the signs of God's arrival in creation, "which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes."
- Conversation starters: Where do you feel the most hope and anticipation these days? In what ways can we say, with Cummings, "I who have died am alive again today"? Where do you notice shadows of despair, either in your own life or in the lives of others? How can we be signs of hope for a weary world?



More light: In this week's passage, by a comparison with "the days of Noah," Jesus implies that we are too often distracted by everyday activities ("eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage"), and therefore overlook God's graceful presence. With this in mind, read Cummings' "i am a little church(no great cathedral)," a meditation on living apart from such distractions "far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying" and "at peace with nature."



- Take a restorative "i thank You God" walk alongside Cummings this week, in a place where "the leaping greenly spirits of trees" and "a blue true dream of sky" are alive and well.
- Many organizations are dedicated to bringing more hope into the
 world through food and shelter, counseling services, transition
 accompaniment, hospice care, policy advocacy, and countless other
 avenues. Choose one or two organizations and pay them a visit
 (online or in person) to learn more about how you can help all for
 the sake of "life and love and wings" and more hope, more hope,
 more hope!
- "i thank You God for most this amazing day" is a modern take on an Elizabethan sonnet (fourteen lines with a closing couplet, and a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG). Try committing it to memory: start with two or three lines, and add a few more each day. By the end of the week, you'll have a classic poem (and a hopeful prayer) you can take with you wherever you go!
- Start a poetry journal for this Advent. Use it to copy down favorite poems, stanzas, lines, or phrases and if the Spirit moves, add some of your own poetry, too, inspired by Cummings and the poetry of the Gospel.

WEEK TWO: PEACE

LIGHT

Two Candles

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 3:1-12

POFTRY

"the glory is fallen out of," by E. E. Cummings



In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." + Matthew 3:1-12

REFLECT

John the Baptizer's opening sermon – "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" – is the essence of the Gospel; Jesus makes it his opening sermon, too (see Matthew 4:17). The Greek word for "repent" is "metanoia," literally "change of mind"; today we might say, "change of heart." Heaven is at hand, and we're called to change accordingly, trading war for peace, presumption for humility, inaction for fruitfulness – and baptism is a tangible, sacramental sign of this change. John's "baptism with water" offers an immersive, exhilarating fresh start, and Jesus' "baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire" promises to burn off whatever "chaff" around our hearts still prevents us from being more kind, more just, more peaceful, more fruitful.

Like John and Jesus, Cummings lived in a time of war (as do we!). With this in mind, "the glory is fallen out of" may be read not only as a stirring meditation on death, but also as a kind of prayer for true repentance, and in particular, for the courage to step into "steep / darkness" with "glad feet." Baptism, after all, is a kind of dying (the Greek baptizo means "to drown"), a dying and rising for the sake of new life. A courageous letting go of the past, even of "all shining things," for the sake of God's future. A stepping forward into the shadows of strife for the sake of God's shalom.

PRAY

God of peace, give us courage. Make us peacemakers. As we walk in the shadows of conflict, give us glad feet that ruin fear, and faces girded with glory. Wash us with water; refine us with fire. Burn away the husks that

hold us back, so we might change our minds, our hearts, our lives – for you are the One who makes all things new. Come, Prince of Peace,

come. Amen.

SING

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

"Down By the Riverside"

"Peace Like a River"

DAILY PRACTICES

- Light two candles each morning and evening this week: a candle of wakefulness, and a candle of shalom. Let them remind you to keep awake, and to look for ways to make peace.
- Conversation starters: What repentance, what "change of mind/ heart" do you long for in your own life? What "chaff" gets in the way? Where do you go, and what do you do, when you need a restorative dose of peace in your life? How can we become more effective peacemakers in our homes, schools, workplaces, and wider communities?
- More light: In his poem, "when god decided to invent," Cummings contrasts God's playful, festive creativity ("one / breath bigger than a circustent") with the self-destructive ways of human sin: focusing on the past ("the was / of shall") and distorting mystery into ideology ("finding only why / smashed it into because"). All of which suggests

that for Cummings, at its heart, repentance is about returning to that joyful, primordial play of the "circustent." And in his 1944 anti-war poem, "plato told," Cummings laments that though the world's great sages have long taught that "war is hell," for some only wounds seem to work (Cummings draws on the urban legend that New York City's elevated subway was in 1939 sold for scrap metal to the Japanese government, who subsequently used it to manufacture munitions).

- Find a beautiful leaf in your neighborhood, and display it somewhere
 you'll see it every day (the fridge? the bathroom mirror?): a tangible
 reminder of what Cummings calls creation's "fragile splendors" and
 a model for the dying-and-rising of true repentance: "no lingering
 no backward- / wondering," but rather a courageous moving forward
 with "glad feet" and "glorygirded faces."
- Some have interpreted the idea of "separating the wheat from the chaff" as an act of exclusion, saving some people and not others. But it's actually an act of refinement: every single grain of wheat has a husk, and separating these husks (collectively called "chaff") is a way of saving every grain of wheat. This raises the question: what "husk" in your life is holding you back, or getting in your way? Take a scrap of paper and write it down and then burn the paper in a fire (a fireplace, campfire, or an Advent candle). By the Spirit's grace, Advent is a season of clearing away the chaff!
- Experience this week's readings through your senses: take a bath and remember your baptism; sit by a fire (or a candle) and remember the Spirit's refining; take a walk through the woods with Cummings and meditate on the leaves, over your head and/or under your feet.



A prompt for your poetry journal: Write a "how to" poem about something simple, such as how to tie your shoes, how to light a candle, or how to pour a cup of coffee. Now take the structure and length of that poem and transform it into a "How to Be a Peacemaker" poem.

WEEK THREE: JO'

LIGHT

Three Candles

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 11:2-11

POETRY

"Christmas Poem," by E. E. Cummings



REFLECT

Among the shadows of sadness and suffering, this week we light a candle of joy. And when we do, Cummings insists, we participate in a reality deeper than all sorrow: for the universe itself is a joyful dance, "spiralling ecstatically" around Jesus, the "newborn babe." Christmas reconnects us to this ongoing cosmic joy, this song that "all creation sings." And though we may forget it, ignore it, or otherwise turn away, this joy cannot be denied. The grim, vacant forces of "mind without soul" are powerless to stop it.

Accordingly, when this "newborn babe" grows up into a rabbi, his ministry is filled with joy. With healing, yes – and with joy! When John sends his disciples to ask, "Are you the one who is to come?", Jesus tells them to report the signs they see: the healing and the hallelujahs and the good news being declared to the poor. In a word: the joy. Tell John the joy you see, the sure sign that 'the one who is to come' has already begun to arrive...

PRAY

God of good news of great joy for all people, give us a share in your delight. Remind us of your cosmic joy, deeper and wider than all sorrow, the gladness of which creation sings. Show us Mary's silent smile, and the babe who blossoms on earth's most prodigious night. Show us the joyful signs of your arrival, and make us into one of them. Come, Jesus, come. Amen.



SING

- "Joy to the World"
- "My Lord, What a Morning"
- "Angels We Have Heard on High"

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

+ Matthew 11:2-11

DAILY PRACTICES

- Light three candles every morning and evening this week: candles of wakefulness, shalom, and joy. Let them remind you to keep awake, to make peace, and to rejoice.
- Conversation starters: The French philosopher and scientist Pierre
 Teilhard de Chardin once remarked, "Joy is the infallible sign of the
 presence of God." Do you agree? If you were to paint a picture of
 joy, what would it look like? (And in honor of Cummings' love for
 painting, go ahead and paint that picture, share it, and discuss!)
- Since one sign of the Gospel is health and healing: participate in a blood drive; contribute to an organization dedicated to public health; and look for tangible ways you can improve your own health and wellbeing.
- Following Cummings' evocation of a universe "spiralling ecstatically," take a night walk this week (under the darkest, starriest skies you can find) – for the sake of God's joy, and yours! Even in areas with lots of light pollution, there's a lot to see in the night sky; research "naked eye stargazing" and see what creation is singing about!

- More light: For another portrait of Jesus, see Cummings' "no time ago," in which he underscores a poignant, powerful idea: in order to give us the joyful companionship of "God with us," Jesus was willing to undergo intense loneliness. And for another portrait of joy, see Cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond." This love poem is typically read as erotic, and it is but it may also be read as riffing on the ancient tradition of using erotic poetry as a way to explore the joyous love between God and humanity (the Bible's Song of Solomon being the most famous example). Indeed, Cummings' language is at times so spirited and expansive as to invite this kind of theological interpretation, as though the poem depicts a radical intimacy between lover and beloved, divine and human so intimate, in fact, as to be a kind of communion. In the end, if the Song of Solomon is any guide, it's this closeness, this joyful companionship, that God wants with us.
- A prompt for your poetry journal: Inspired by Cummings, write your own version of a "cosmic view" of Christmas – and then write the complementary opposite, a "domestic" or "personal view," perhaps a Christmas memory that stands out in your life. What connections can you find between these "cosmic" and "domestic" portraits of Christmas?

WEEK FOUR: LOVE

LIGHT

Four Candles

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 1:18-25

POETRY

"love is more thicker than forget" and "i carry your heart with me(i carry it in," by E. E. Cummings

REFLECT

This familiar passage from Matthew is a love story – with at least two kinds of tension. First, Matthew portrays Joseph as a "righteous man," someone who was likely aware of the brutal law that if a man discovers that the woman he has just betrothed is not a virgin, "the men of her



Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. + Matthew 1:18-25

town shall stone her to death" (Deut 22:21). And second, it may be that Joseph understands from the outset that the Holy Spirit is involved in Mary's pregnancy, and Joseph is afraid. What could he possibly offer the Child of God? Surely he should step aside. Which is precisely why the angel in his dream says, Do not be afraid. You have a role to play...

From both of these angles, in the end Joseph acts with courageous love. He chooses the tenderness of Micah 6 ("do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God") over the brutality of Deuteronomy 22. He agrees to play the role of stepparent for God's Child. In his time and place, Joseph taps into the timeless, universal love at the heart of all things, the same love Cummings mind-bendingly compares to a "sea...deeper than the sea" and a "sky...higher than the sky" – and then again to "the sky of the sky of a tree called life" in a sonnet we can imagine Mary and Joseph whispering to each other, or either parent whispering into Jesus' ear, or God whispering to humanity.

PRAY

God of tenderness, grant us your courageous love. In the shadows of fear and hate, let us be candles of confidence and care. Give us the strength and compassion to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Let us love with abandon, mad and moonly, sane and sunly. Carry our hearts in your heart. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"
"Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow"



DAILY PRACTICES

- Light four candles every morning and evening this week: candles
 of wakefulness, shalom, joy, and love. Let them remind you to keep
 awake, to make peace, to rejoice, and to love with courage and
 abandon.
- Conversation starters: Have you ever had a dream that influenced a decision? If you could wake up tomorrow with more courage in any area of your life, what courage would you wish for? What kind of love does Cummings' poem, "i carry your heart with me(i carry it in" make you think of? Romantic love? Parental love? God's love? Is there a story of love in your life that resembles the love in Cummings' poems?
- More light: For another window into Cummings' ideas about love, read "love is a place," bearing in mind that the words, "love," "God," and "yes" are closely linked in Cummings' work. And for a brief portrait of loneliness, the shadowed opposite of love's companionship, read "l(a," one of Cummings' most celebrated masterpieces as much a visual poem as a verbal one.
- What courageous love have you noticed recently? Drop the person a line to thank them for their inspiration (a handwritten note if you can!).
- Whose heart do you carry? Who carries yours? Reach out to them and let them know – with a love letter, a painting, or even Cummings' poem itself, decorated with the poem's images of sun, moon, buds, trees, and stars...
- A prompt for your poetry journal: What does love look like? Where do you glimpse it: in the story of Mary and Joseph? In your own life, your family, your friends, your pet? In God's good news for the world?

CHRISTMAS EVE



LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:1-14

POETRY

"little tree" and "brlght," by E. E. Cummings



In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" + Luke 2:1-14

REFLECT

Cummings' "little tree" was one of his first published poems, and also the one he featured in his annual Christmas letter to friends in 1960, two years before his death. It's a lovely holiday memory, and at the same time, the poem hints at a poignant sorrow – not just by evoking days gone by, but also by way of the child's innocence about the tree ("were you very sorry to come away?") and by extension, the world ("there won't be a single place dark or unhappy"). Cummings simultaneously celebrates the radiant beauty of Christmas Eve (note the extra spacing after both "see" and "look") and subtly points toward the longing inside it, and inside us. And if we listen for it, we can hear this same mixture of beauty and longing in Luke's story of the Holy Family and the shepherds in the field.

The poem "brlght" is a wonderful example of Cummings' adventurous, experimental style. At first, it seems to be a jumble of words and characters – but if we spend some time with it, like the magi studying a star chart, the poem opens like a door. The line groupings are arranged in numerical progression, from the first line standing alone to the final five-line stanza, suggesting a kind of journey, or a far-off object growing in size as we approach. The word "star" gradually moves from "s???" to "sta?" to "star," as if it's coming into view in the poem's sky. Likewise, the word "bright" gradually disappears, at last becoming "?????T," as if fading with the dawn. The poem's various capital letters spell out "BRIGHT," "YES," and "WHO." And what's it all about? The star of Bethlehem, no doubt, since Cummings repeatedly evokes the beloved carol: "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright..." Here is a poem not just to read, but to ponder and experience, with the slow, patient attention that mysteries – and epiphanies – sometimes require.

PRAY

God of wakefulness, shalom, joy, and love; God of trees and stars, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi: thank you for being a God of silence and song. Thank you for bringing hope where there is despair, peace where there is conflict, joy where there is sorrow, and love where there is fear. Give us the grace and patience, the longing and courage, to follow you and do the same. Thank you for coming to dwell with us, to live with us, to wake us up, calm us down, and love us back to life. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

Choose a favorite Christmas carol (or two)! "The First Noel"

- "Silent Night"
- "Go Tell It On the Mountain"





ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS