



I had only one thing on my list: a lightbulb for the fixture in the entry way. It would be a quick trip—and with such a short list, I couldn't possibly get distracted. I know, right? So I made my way into the store and was heading straight for the Light Bulb Department when I happened to glance to my left. That's when I got distracted. I was just so surprised. I shouldn't have been surprised. But I was—I know how this works, it happens every year. It was only the second week in October and there they were in all of their holiday glory: Christmas Trees—and lots of them: 2-foot Douglas Firs, 4-foot, non-lit Spruces, 6 foot, pre-lit, "Realistic" and 7 foot "More Realistic" Christmas trees. Seriously—"Realistic and More Realistic?" There were flocked wreaths, gigantic 15-foot tall Santa Clauses and, oddly, plastic palm trees. My mouth hung open as I walked past wrapping paper, miles of scotch tape and both indoor and outdoor lights. Then it got personal: snow shovels and ice scrapers for windshields. And then it got downright mean: snow blowers. Did I mention that it was only the second week of October?

We know how this goes, it happens every year. We're barely finished with Labor Day and the Halloween decorations go up. Just when we're beginning to think about carving pumpkins, the electric reindeer show up in the neighbor's yard. And just when you think it's too early for Bing Crosby to be singing White Christmas, recipes for what to do with leftover turkey flood the inbox. The only silver lining is that by the time start thinking about New Year's Resolutions, the line: "...I'm so-and-so and I approved this message" is a distant memory.

Today we welcome the season of Advent, a short, four-week season of waiting, anticipating, and preparing for the coming season of Christmas. But it's also a season of questions. As we prepare for the season of joy and celebration, do you ever feel like you're heading into the Season of Stress and Distraction? Do you ever feel like the agenda of the culture around you wants to suck you into the vortex of pressure and striving? Do you ever wonder why it is that you finally arrive at Christmas and wish it was February? I know I do. And that's why I'm urging you today to press back against the powerful cultural momentum to turn

these seasons into an all-out spending-and-accumulation fest by paying specific attention to how you practice the season of Advent. By keeping the main thing the main thing in the season of Advent, we can move more deeply into life and aliveness that comes with welcoming the gift of Christ at Christmas.

There is an ancient passage buried deeply in the Hebrew Scriptures that tells a story of a young man who did just that; a young Jewish man who pushed back against the powers of the culture and remained faithful to God in the midst of wild—literally "wild" pressure. His name was Daniel. For a lot of people, Daniel's name is synonymous with "The Lion's Den." That's just one of the many stories about this remarkable young man. There's a much more. Let me give you a quick overview and then read the story. Daniel loved God. But his faith and love for God was constantly under pressure from the cultural around him. But Daniel trusted God to give him the strength to remain faithful and hopeful. Daniel faced his lion and God gave him exactly what he needed just when he needed it. Let's look at the story from Daniel 6:6-23 read from the Spark Story Bible for Kids:

Daniel loved God. He prayed every day and tried to live as God told him to live. Daniel knew that no matter what God was always with him. Daniel's good friend, King Darius, put Daniel in charge of many things in his kingdom. Some men got very jealous of Daniel and decided to get him into some trouble. "Heh! Heh!" they thought. "We'll get Daniel yet!"

The men tricked the king into making a law that everyone had to pray to King Darius and not God! Anyone who broke this law would be placed into a den full of lions—YIKES!

Daniel was very afraid of lions, but he prayed to God anyway! Daniel knew he could get into big trouble. He also knew God would always be with him.

Trouble came quickly. The men who tricked King Darius saw Daniel praying. "Aha!" they said. "Now we've got him!" Now he won't be the king's favorite!" They went to tell the team. "King Darius! Daniel is praying to his God instead of you!" King Darius looked puzzled. Daniel always prayed to his God. What was the big deal? Then the men reminded him. "You must put Daniel in the lions' den! You made it a law, remember?"

Oh no! King Darius didn't want to put Daniel in the lions' den! He didn't want Daniel to be hurt! But king Darius had to follow his own law. Daniel was put in with the lions. King Darius said, "I hope your God helps you!" He went home and stayed awake all night worrying about Daniel.

In the lions' den, it was dark and scary. Lions growled all around Daniel. Daniel prayed, "God, I know you are with me. Please help me!" God was with Daniel.

At sunrise, King Darius hurried to the lions' den and had it opened. "Daniel?" He called. "Are you there? Did your God save you?" Daniel answered, "I'm here! God kept the lions from hurting me! God always keeps me safe!" King Darius was overjoyed to see his friend. From that day on King Darius believed in God.

So there it is—another ancient story that speaks fresh and specifically into our lives today. But even though I read it from a Children's Bible, one thing is for sure: this is not just a children's story. Sure, you've got the lions in there, Daniel gets thrown into what certainly seems like a 'not-so-happy-meal' and then he gets delivered and then lives happily ever after. But there are deeper questions that we should ask; questions about values and conformity and what we do with all of the things in our lives that try to make us give up, give in and conform to our culture, undercutting our most basic values and commitments. This is a story that asks us to face the bigger questions of faith and faithfulness and what happens when we experience competing values. And specifically, in the season of Advent, how do we keep the main thing the main thing?

Arriving at the first Sunday in the season of Advent is not for the faint of heart. And really, neither is Christmas. These two seasons with all of their beauty and warmth can often feel like a battle ground for what's most important. I'll be honest; it's a struggle I deal with every year. The joy and warmth I want to feel is often tempered with the emptiness of trying to keep up, step up and measure up. Really, in a sense, we're still dealing with the same kinds of issues that Daniel faced: how do we remain faithful when so much energy is focused on us to cash it all in?

So I have some questions for you. When people read this story, they go right to the lion's den piece and more often than not, get to the end of the story and think, "Wow, cool—he didn't get eaten by the lion. That reminds me, I'm hungry, what's for lunch? But if we let the story do what it was intended to do—to speak powerfully into our lives today, we can let the story pose some important questions which pertain to our own spiritual growth—perhaps none more pointed than these: what lion are you facing right now? What dark, frightening den are you trying to escape today? What frightening force is prowling around you, growling at you? In this season of preparation to celebrate the (re)birth of Christ in us, what power threatens to undo that; what fear, what overwhelming force threatens to consume you? Is it financial and time pressures? Is it the threat of isolation? How about family tensions, or even blending families? Some people are dealing with the pain of separation and divorce; others are trying to figure out the first holiday season in a new family dynamic. Others are grieving the loss of loved ones or reflecting on the changes brought on by another year gone by.

Or maybe it's just the age-old issue of over-consuming. Again, if I'm honest, in my own life, when I find myself lost in the season of consumption, I'm usually the one being consumed. It's the weekend after Thanksgiving—we should be filled up! After all of the consuming we've done in the past days, we should be full to the brim. But we're not—I know I'm not. I tend to just want more. But when it comes right down to it—even at this time of year

I'm often hungry, angry, lonely and tired. I'm hungry for more than what the culture around me offers. I can get angry because I don't measure up—I don't wear the right clothes and don't have the newest gadgets. I find myself lonely for my dad whom I just buried in October. I feel loneliness when I see families gathered around the Christmas tree and there's grandpa sitting there—I feel that that loss deeply especially at this time of year. And I feel tired from just so much stuff going on; parties and gatherings and schedules and work and shoveling and... whew! I know I don't have to give in to all of that. But I do. And my guess is that you do too. So what do we do?

I learned a long time ago that when I'm any one of these things, hungry, angry, lonely and tired, I should halt... H.A.L.T. I should stop and take a look at what's going on, because something is going on. When I'm experiencing any one of these things, my relationships suffer and I'm not experiencing the kind of life and aliveness that the seasons of Advent and Christmas provide. When I'm hungry, I'm not being filled with life sustaining things. When I'm angry it's usually because I've lost my emotional balance. When I'm lonely, I've not paid enough attention to the relationships in my life; I've thought too much of myself and not enough of those around me. And when I'm tired I've usually burned the candle at both ends.

How about you? When you think about the next several weeks, do you hear just a little growling from the shadows? Do you feel like you're going to be eaten alive by the pace? Is it a season of darkness and fear for you?

I want to invite you into this Advent practice with me and you can begin that practice this week with the Daily Reading Schedule. Each day's readings will equip you to lean into the wind of Spirit to help you prepare for the days ahead.

When you're hungry; when you feel like you're running on empty, I want to challenge you to halt—stop and fill yourself with the words of hope and promise from scripture ("How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" Psalm 119:103). This is the best way I know to know better the God who sat in that darkness with Daniel and gave him hope.

When you find yourself frustrated and even angry, it's usually a sign and a challenge to halt—stop and (Proverbs 14:29) take a deep breath, close your eyes and ask the Spirit of God to breathe some fresh air into your life.

When you're lonely and that grinding emptiness seems to run so deep in your soul, consider it a challenge to halt—to stop and consider the promise that (Deuteronomy 31:8) the message of Advent and Christmas is that God is with us (John 1:14)

And if you're just worn out—when you're beyond tired, (Matthew 11:28-30), consider this the season an invitation to halt—to stop at the cradle and wait for the birth that changes everything.