

THE MONASTIC WAY

Joan Chittister

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Art by Ansgar Holmberg



The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life, but long for greater spiritual depth. Each month in 2017, Joan Chittister invites you to explore words of Scripture that stretch the soul and help you to construct your world differently—to discover how God dwells among us in surprising forms.



*I have come to set fire
to the earth.*

Luke 12:49

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Merry Christmas, the happiest—and saddest—season of the year.

In December, the Christian world lights up with candles everywhere. “Our light has come,” we sing in reference to the birth of Jesus who is “the light of the world.”

It’s a theological statement so profound it can take a lifetime to really appreciate the breadth of its meaning: In Jesus the entire world can see the will of God for the nations. Light a candle. In Jesus everyone is welcome. Light another candle. In Jesus we see the clearest face of God on earth. Let all the lights glow. In Jesus we see the kind of life we ourselves are meant to live. May that light shine in me. In Jesus we get a glimpse of both the Light and the Way to God.

The world lights up before our eyes and the implications of those insights are breathtaking.

But it’s really not that simple, is it?

The truth is that those candles are meant to say as much about us as they say about the nature of the feast itself.

Window lights, I learned as a child, were meant to signal to the world that anyone who might pass by, another Joseph and Mary, perhaps, were welcome in that place. Hospitality of the heart, I came to understand, was the real mark of Christmas people for whose Jesus “there was no room in the inn.”

More than that, I came to understand over the years, those candles signal the kind of underlying joy that is meant to gladden the heart just to be alive. The laughter and the hymns of the season are everywhere. But loss is everywhere, too. There are people missing at every table every year who, just the year before, we took for granted. Then, the Christmas question becomes: Whose life am I making easier now, while they are still alive?

The Christmas my mother died, I saw the rest of the message of the Christmas lights in vivid color. Caught between the dark of Advent and the early decorations of the feast, we buried her on Christmas Eve.

People from everywhere took time out of that last busy week, to travel to the monastery to say good-bye, to leave a soft hug and care. The quiet of death mixed with the ballads of Christmas and the soft lights on the trees made death a part of life in a very different way.

In the midst of the emptiness of death, the candles spoke another insight to me: Loss was real but the need to go on for the sake of the rest of life was just as intense.

The Jesus of whom the carols sing—the babe in the manger—is also the Jesus who says in the Gospel of Luke, “I have come to set fire to the earth.” And it is this awareness that completes the meaning of Christmas.

Jesus came to change things so that all “may have life and have it more abundantly.”

Clearly, Christmas calls us all to see life itself as blessing enough. But it calls us, too, to light up the dark parts of the world around us so that others may have new life, as well. That’s why we give gifts—to remind ourselves in the glow of the candles that we ourselves are here to be a blessing to those around us.

Then the season is complete in us: We have discovered in ourselves the great compassion it takes to be a gift to others who need us as we need this Jesus. We are ready now to make Christmas the season after which the lights of life and joy and universal hospitality and generosity never go out in the human race.



Friday, December 1: It is awareness of the needs of others and compassion for their suffering that make us real Christmas people. “I think perhaps it is better for the world,” Helen Waddell writes, “if one has a broken heart. One is then quick to recognize it elsewhere.”

Saturday, December 2: When we become a Christmas light in someone else’s life, we take the first step in making the world a better place to be.

Sunday, December 3: It is not the person who has never known pain who is the most developed. It is the compassionate person, the person who feels the pain of the other, who is really fully human.

Monday, December 4: To light up the face of another with joy and surprise is the greatest Christmas gift of all.

Tuesday, December 5: The truly compassionate person is the most “human,” human being of all. “Compassion,” Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, “is the basis of morality.”

Wednesday, December 6: If we cannot feel the pain of the other, we cannot be trusted not to cause pain ourselves.

Thursday, December 7: The compassionate person “brings fire to the earth,” the fire it takes to stop the evil, to overcome the indifference. As Daniel Goleman says of it, “True compassion means not only feeling another’s pain but also being moved to help relieve it.”

Friday, December 8: Christmas is an exercise in compassion and care. We give to others to remind them that someone cares enough for them to want to be part of their lives. We signal them that we are standing by, a light by which they may safely walk life’s path.

Saturday, December 9: There’s no such thing as a small gift. Every gift is a gift of loving remembrance in an otherwise

lonely world. Mary Anne Radmacher notes: “There is no small act of kindness. Every compassionate act makes large the world.”

Sunday, December 10: The gift of compassion is a call to action. We do not really feel suffering unless we do something to allay it. Which is where donations, verbal support and advocacy become our participation in the work of those who do direct action where we cannot.

Monday, December 11: Life is full of temptations to do nothing: First, we can drop out of social involvement because of despair and depression. We tell ourselves that we can’t bear to think of such things. So we don’t. And evil has its way. “What you don’t do,” Eleanor Roosevelt said, “can be a destructive force.”

Tuesday, December 12: Life is full of temptations to do nothing: Second, we can assume that the problem is too great to resolve. So we simply go along, saying and doing nothing because “that’s life.” Which means that we ourselves become part of the problem. To say nothing is to agree. As Elie Wiesel writes: “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest it.”

Wednesday, December 13: Like drops of water on a stone, everything we do changes the nature of the world around us. Do something to change evil to good.

Thursday, December 14: Compassion is a synonym for fire. It fuels us to contribute something, however small, to change what must be changed. Otherwise, however much we think we celebrate Christmas, the suffering people around us will never be able to live full and happy lives.

Friday, December 15: One Christmas gift to the poor every year won’t do it. All the rest of the year we must work to make their pay, their health insurance, their housing and their education better. “The opposite of love,” Elie Wiesel points out, “is not hate, but indifference.”

Saturday, December 16: May every candle you and I light in our houses this Christmas be a sign of some small thing we will do the rest of the year to make life brighter for someone else.

Sunday, December 17: The face of the refugee on our television sets is a cry for compassion. The problem is with the definition of compassion. Compassion is not intellectual analysis of a social issue. Compassion is a real feeling for real persons strong enough to drive me to do something to make things better for them.

Monday, December 18: Crowd-funding may be this generation’s best indicator of the depth of this country’s compassion. It helps particular people a little and alerts us to the enormity of this kind of pain. That is a recipe for national change if, of course, public pressure comes with it. “Sentiment without action,” Edward Abbey writes, “is the ruin of the soul.”

Tuesday, December 19: Every Christmas is an invitation to compassion as well as to gratitude for our own blessings. Between them lies the secret to happiness.

Wednesday, December 20: Politics is meant to be an exercise in public compassion. Instead, it is turning into a way to make those who are already secure even more secure, and those who are insecure, invisible. We call it “rugged individualism” to hide its evil underbelly. As Dom Helder Camara wrote, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a

saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Question for us: How do we engage in public compassion?

Thursday, December 21: The easiest way to change the world is to change it where we stand. That way we can all change the world for the better one square foot at a time.

Friday, December 22: If you want to get over feeling bored or frustrated, find a reason, a goal, a passion larger than yourself to get you out of bed in the morning. “Petty things become unimportant,” Stephen Covey writes, “when people are impassioned about a purpose higher than the self.”

Saturday, December 23: Here’s a tip: If all your friends are from your own social background, educational level, pay rate and color, you need to reach out before your soul atrophies. There is no education so good as what we can get by beginning to mix with people unlike ourselves. “Could a greater miracle take place,” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “than for us to look through each other’s eye for an instant?”

Sunday, December 24: Christmas lights invite us to see the world differently. We must come to realize where there are no lights and take some there—to the hospitals, and dark neighborhoods, and nursing homes, and prisons, and shelters, and refugee centers—every day of the year.

Monday, December 25: No, Jesus did not deserve to be born in an animal shelter. But he went where he least belonged and was most needed. And so must we if we are ever to really know the world and our own responsibility to it. As the Greek philosopher Euripides wrote, “When good people are hurt, all who would be called good must suffer with them.”

Tuesday, December 26: The great Christmas party of life is the one where a great cross section of life is comfortable in one place together. Host one of those every year and your life will change forever.

Wednesday, December 27: Hospitality, generosity, compassion and light are the call of Christmas to the world. Have a party where each of those elements is a conscious, common commitment and the effects of that Christmas party will never end. “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is,” Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “What are you doing for others?”

Thursday, December 28: Christmas is as much a time for giving as it is for getting. The only question is, Will we remember to give to those who cannot give to us? “Let us love,” Thérèse of Lisieux said, “since our heart is made for nothing else.”

Friday, December 29: Make Christmas—its generosity, compassion, and care—a feast in the church calendar that we celebrate every day of our lives.

Saturday, December 30: The great question of the individual life is the hardest: What do you really care about? Is it worth it? Whose pain do you carry within you? Are you being vocal enough about it? Or as Martin Luther King, Jr. goes on, “Your life begins to end the moment you start being silent about the things that matter.”

Sunday, December 31: The greatest gift of Christmas to us is the realization that what we have and take for granted so many others lack, have never tasted, cannot ever know. But we do. And so...?

— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



*I have come to set fire
to the earth.*

Luke 12:49

*Spend a few minutes
with this quote and
then ask yourself:*

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?
- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?
- My journal response to this quote is:

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