

**Mothers' Encouragement Group**  
**December 4, 2014**  
**Advent Interlude**

I thought we might take a break from thinking about the Ten Commandments in order to turn our minds more specifically to the season of Advent which has just begun. I love the way the Church calendar brings us back over and over to the life of our Savior here on earth and to all the riches of cosmic truth of which He is the author and to which He is also the responder. (How is this possible? Only God knows!) I read just recently that “the answer to deep anxiety is the deep adoration of God.” *The Greatest Gift*, p. 14 by Jan Voskamp. I am letting this remark sit in my mind and heart and am grateful for the celebrations and remembrances of the Church that help me to think more deeply and carefully about our Savior—my Savior.

But first, something to make you laugh. This is a blog I may have quoted to you once or so before—called “A Musing Marilee.” Vangie sent it to us this week and I knew you girls would relate:

**Onesie Slogans From Your Baby**, November 28, 2014 by Maralee:

“I’m not a huge fan of onesies with sassy sayings on them. Especially ones that are kind of rude (I’m looking at you, “My mom is hotter than your mom”, Onesie). The mom is the one looking at those onesies most of the time, so why not use this great opportunity to send a message to her instead of to the other moms on the playground? Let’s be real— If I’m at the playground I’m trying to make friends, not insult them. I did buy a onesie with a sassy saying on it once. It literally said “Sassy” which was adorable on my sassy daughter until I realized in every picture I took when she had that onesie on she had an arm covering the first letter. Not cool.

I decided to create my own onesie slogans for moms. What would babies say if they could? What messages do moms need to see every time they look down at that precious baby?....” Here are some Onesie Slogans from your Baby:

Sorry for spitting up in your hair. I know I sound angry, but I’m just tired.

Are we going out today? Then why are you getting out of your pajamas?

I won’t tell anyone I saw you lick the ice-cream container.

Sing as loud as you want. I haven’t yet developed musical taste.

Breastmilk tastes better when it comes from a coffee drinker.

You should probably have me do some tummy time today so the pediatrician doesn’t give you that look again.

Don’t let my screaming deter you from getting the snot out of my nose.

I know he keeps poking me in the eye, but he'll probably end up being a pretty great big brother.

Stop reading parenting articles that make you mad. Just. Stop.

I see how Daddy looks at you. You've still got it.      You smell great. . . at least to me.

I can't tell if the house is clean.    Don't forget— you fed me on the left side first this morning.

Parenting will get better. And also worse. Sorry about that.

I like being bottle-fed. And my opinion is the only one that should matter.

Be gentle. Someday I'll change your diapers.      I was last bathed on a Wednesday.

You just had a baby. Stop trying to fit back into your jeans.

Don't worry about what Grandma said. You're doing a great job. And also, I don't think she meant it the way you're taking it.

If you dance with me, I'm too young to be embarrassed about it. Enjoy these days.

It's okay to change in front of me. I promise I won't remember what you look like naked. . . .!

Now to turn our thoughts from our babies to the coming of that one baby who turned out to be the Savior of the world, I want to read to you a portion of a book that recently came into my hands. It is called *The Greatest Gift, Unwrapping the Full Love Story of Christmas* by Ann Voskamp. Ann is a Canadian, the wife of a farmer, mother of six. She has also authored a bestselling book called *One Thousand Gifts* which I have not read but my girls have. Her writing is tender, unique and full of love for, and insight about, our Savior. (If she herself is not Dutch she did at least marry a Dutchman so I'm thinking she can't be all bad and, in fact, having those Dutch/German roots myself—you know, Voskamp, Roskamp!—would be passionate about whatever she chose to write about!) This is how she introduces the subject of Advent:

“*Big and glossy* and loud and fast—that's how this bent-up world turns.

“But God, when He comes—He shows up in this fetal ball.

“He who carved the edges of the cosmos curved Himself into a fetal ball in the dark, tethered Himself to the uterine wall of a virgin, and lets His cells divide, light splitting all white.

“He gave up the heavens that were not even large enough to contain Him and lets Himself be held in a hand.

“The mystery so large becomes the Baby so small, and infinite God becomes infant.

“The Giver becomes the Gift, this quiet offering.

“This heart beating in the chest cavity of a held child, a thrumming heart beating hope, beating change, beating love, beating the singular song you've been waiting for—that the whole dizzy planet's been spinning round waiting for.

“Waiting.

“*Advent.*

“It comes from the Latin.

“It means ‘coming.’

“When you open the pages of Scripture to read of His coming, of this first Advent, before you ever read of the birth of Jesus, you always have the genealogy of Jesus.

“It’s the way the Gift unwraps: you have Christ’s family tree...before you have a Christmas tree. If you don’t come to Christmas through Christ’s family tree and you come into the Christmas story just at the Christmas tree—this is hard, to understand the meaning of His coming.

“Because without the genealogy of Christ, the limbs of His past, the branches of His family, the love story of His heart that has been coming for you since before the beginning—how does Christmas and its tree stand? Its roots would be sheared. Its meaning would be stunted. The arresting pause of the miracle would be lost.

“Because in the time of prophets and kings, the time of Mary and Joseph, it wasn’t your line of credit, line of work, or line of accomplishments that explained who you were. It was your family line. It was family that mattered. Family gives you context, and origin gives you understanding, and the family tree of Christ always gives you hope.

“The coming of Christ was right through families of messed-up monarchs and battling brothers, through affairs and adultery and more than a feud or two, through skeletons in closets and cheaters at tables. It was in that time of prophets and kings, the time of Mary and Joseph, that men were in genealogies and women were invisible. But for Jesus, women had names and stories and lives that mattered.

“The family tree of Christ startlingly notes not one woman but four. Four broken women—women who felt like outsiders, like has-beens, like never-beens. Women who were weary of being taken advantage of, of being unnoticed and uncherished and unappreciated; women who didn’t fit in, who didn’t know how to keep going, what to believe, where to go—women who had thought about giving up. And Jesus claims exactly these who are wandering and wondering and wounded and worn out as *His*. He grafts you into His line and His story and His heart, and He gives you His name, His lineage, His righteousness. He graces you with plain grace.

“Is there a greater Gift you could want or need or have?

“Christ comes right to your Christmas tree and looks at your family tree and says, ‘I am your God, and I am one of you, and I’ll be the Gift, and I’ll take you. *Take Me?*’

“This, *this*, is the love story that’s been coming for you since the beginning.

“It is possible for you to miss it.

“To brush past it, to rush through it, to not see how it comes for you up over the edges of everything, quiet and unassuming and miraculous—how every page of the Word has been writing it, reaching for you, coming for you. And you could wake on Christmas only to grasp that you never took the whole of the Gift, the wide expanse of grace. So now we pause. Still. Ponder. Hush. Wait. Each day of Advent, He gives you the gift of time, so you have time to be still and wait.

“Wait for the coming of the God in the manger who makes Himself bread for us near starved.

“For the Savior in swaddlings who makes Himself the robe of righteousness for us worn out.

“For Jesus, who makes precisely what none of us can but all of us want: Christmas.

“Sometimes the heart waiting for the Gift...is the art of the Gift.

“This waiting, your art—mark it.

“Mark Advent with a counting, a way of staying awake and not missing.

“It could happen like the numbering of time, like the rings on a tree.

“Like leaning over that Jesse Tree of the Old Testament, that Jesse Tree axed down, and counting rings down to the greatest Gift, to life out of the dream cut off.

“That Jesse Tree, named after Jesse, who was the father of David—David to whom God promised that his line and his sons and his family would reign forever without end.

“And when David’s sons and grandsons and great-grandsons turned from God and loved the gifts and the flesh more than the Giver and the Father—their kingdoms fell. Their homes fell apart.

“It looked as if the whole family tree of Jesse had been chopped right off at the roots. But God...

“But our covenant-keeping, promise-keeping God vowed, **‘Out of the stump of David’s family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root....In that day the heir to David’s throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.’** Isaiah 11:1, 10.

“Out of the stump of our hearts...

“In this day, this season, miracles will grow within, unfurl, bear fruit.

“And the heart that makes time and space for Him to come will be a glorious place.

“A place of sheer radiant defiance in the face of a world careening mad and stressed.

“Because each day of Advent, we will actively wait.

“We will wait knowing that the remaking of everything has already begun.

“We will linger over the lines of the Old Testament stories, tracing the branches of the family tree of Christ, the spreading pageantry of humankind, from Adam to the Messiah—each historical truth pointing to the coming, the already relief, the incarnation of God.

“We’ll still and slow and trace each exquisite ornament pictured with these twenty-five Advent narratives, each ornament cut slow out of paper.

“And there He is—the exquisite Gift cut and given for us, broken.

“The Gift who hung on a Tree for us, cut off.

“The Gift who was pierced for you, wounded—your wounded, willing God, who unfolds Himself on the Tree as your endless, greatest Gift.” *The Greatest Gift*, pp. vii-xii.

This is the introduction of her book that contains, for each day of Advent, a short devotional especially for women, based on Scripture texts all but six of which are taken from the Old Testament. If you’re thinking, “It’s all very well for her to be talking about ‘still and slow’ and ‘He gives you the gift of time, so you have time to be still and wait’—when do I ever have time to be still and slow and to wait?!” This is what the inside dust cover of the book says about Ann Voskamp: “...Ann loses library books, usually has a sink full of soaking pots, and sees empty laundry baskets rarer than a blue moon.” She is a home-schooler! But what I believe she is trying to communicate is what happens *inside*—deep in the heart, in the mind, in the place where no one can go but you and the Lord—this is where the ‘still’ happens and where the ‘slow’ is. As Anna Waring put it so eloquently, “a mind to blend with outward life, while keeping at thy side.”

In keeping with the Dutch theme I want to read to you a Dutch Christmas-story. You may remember that Rob used it some time ago as his entire evening sermon—don’t worry, it’s not that long! It is a story that appeared in a Dutch book called *Peper en Zout* (‘Pepper and Salt’), under the pseudonym, M.E. Voila (French for ‘so there’). The book is a series of anecdotes taken

from the experience of a pastor in The Netherlands. The translation of the story is by John H. Piersma, pastor of First Christian Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa. (You can't get much more Dutch than that!)

A shrill, merciless telephone woke me during the night which bridges Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Drunk with sleep I staggered to the desk in my study, picked up the phone and muttered an indifferent greeting. A woman's voice responded.

'Am I speaking with the pastor?' 'Yes, yes, and you...?' 'This is the home of Mr. Karmon. I'm his private nurse. Would it be possible for you to come right over? Mr. Karmon has made special request for you. I know that it is a very inconvenient time, but I'm to ask anyway.' My thinking became clearer. Karmon, of course, since he was very ill. Earlier in the week I had called on him. 'Certainly, nurse, I'll come immediately.'

While dressing, my thoughts were occupied with Mr. Karmon. He was an unusual person. He had been a widower for many years. An elderly, grey-haired housekeeper took care of him and his home. Karmon was very shy and reserved. Earlier in life he had been a successful manufacturer, but just prior to the War he had turned that business over to younger men. ...He had now lived for several years almost like a hermit. During the last while he had shown increasing signs of failing health.

A lonesome life, and I now surmised that it would be a lonesome death as well.

Strange, but I knew so little about him. How long had he been a widower? Now that I was thinking about it I realized that I had never heard anyone speak of his wife, and apparently there had been no children.

I knew that he was a man of sound judgment and that he possessed abilities which would entitle him to a place of prominence in life, perhaps also in the life of the church. But there were objections: he never partook of Holy Communion. During the annual home visitation the elders would discuss this with him, but in vain. A particular reason was never volunteered, and although he accepted the admonition with his customary courtesy, his refusal was firm. After a while it was no longer discussed and his name was seldom mentioned.

He and I had also discussed this matter privately, but with the same result. For that matter, whenever conversation turned in the direction of his personal, inner life he would become very uncommunicative, his replies would come with great difficulty, and he would stare vacantly out of the window at things far removed from his room.

For the rest Karmon was an exemplary person, a faithful churchgoer, honest and generous. During the last weeks I had visited him occasionally, but they weren't easy visits. His quiet, almost secretive manner was more pronounced than usual.

It was a few degrees below freezing and the tyres of my bicycle crunched softly on the asphalt pavement of the canal-lined street as I rode through the silent star-lit night, passing house after house with windows staring from corpse-like eyes over the water. With a strange weird effect the bells of the clock in the carillon of the old tower suddenly exploded downward, their peals ricocheting recklessly against gable and tree. I counted the number: the night was almost past, the night of Christmas. In a few hours I would be standing in my pulpit and the congregation would be singing with joy because of the birth of the Christ-child. But in the house to which I was going there was another gathering—the gathering of the shadows of death.

My thoughts returned to Karmon and in my memory arose the case of the orphanage. We needed money and I visited Karmon to solicit a donation from him. He would have to have some time to think it over, he said, but the very next day he called to say that he would pledge a gift of a thousand guilders. There was one express stipulation, however, and that was that his name should not be mentioned. The money had been a real lifesaver for the orphanage. And no one but myself had ever so much as guessed the identity of the donor.

Everything about him was, no, mysterious was not the right word, but nevertheless very unusual: his behavior, his seclusion, his church life. And even his outward appearance, which was marked by heavy black eyebrows and a head of thick grey hair.

And now he had to die. It amazed me that he had asked for me. Was he afraid of death? I didn't know why, but I couldn't easily believe that. Karmon looked to me like one cut out of different wood, although...but shortly I would know.

There stood the high silhouette of his house. A weak beam of light shone between the curtains of an upper window. As softly as possible I rang the doorbell. I heard the muffled creakings of footsteps on the staircase. The nurse opened the door very quietly.

'How is he?' I asked. 'Quite well for the moment. The doctor says that he could linger for several days, but that it might also be all over within a few hours. You know, of course, that he is suffering from a terminal malignancy?'

I nodded as we climbed the staircase. In front of the door leading to the sickroom stood a Mrs. De Laat, Mr. Karmon's sister-in-law. She was much younger than her brother-in-law and from conversation with her I understood that she had already been staying in the Karmon home for a few days in order to assist with the housekeeping and the nursing.

Whisperingly she told me that it had taken some doing to get Karmon to approve of her taking her little daughter with her, even though she could not get away from home without her. She shrugged her shoulders and I couldn't resist the impression that she bore little affection for her sick relative to whose side she had come solely out of a sense of duty. 'He has always had a dislike for children, you know,' she offered.

I thought for a moment about the orphanage, but I simply nodded and followed the nurse into the large room, where, back of a screen, stood a bed. It was immediately noticeable that Karmon had failed rapidly, even in the few days since I had last visited him. In the soft light of the lamp above his bed it looked as if the lines in his face had been carved with a knife and when he had turned his head upon the pillow his eyes made the slow rotating movement which one sees oftener in those who no longer have a will to resist death's encroachment. His arms lay straight and motionless upon the sheets, the hands powerless. Nevertheless he was an impressive figure, and again I was struck with the contrast between the thickly-planted grey hair and the black eyebrows.

With a weak but audible voice he asked his nurse to excuse us since he wished to speak with me alone. After the door closed with a soft sigh behind her he waited for a few seconds. Then he raised his eyes and looked at me as one who had reached a very hard decision. I began the conversation:

'You asked if I would come; can I help you?' With the same rather thin but yet plain voice he answered, 'Yes, and it is indeed very difficult for you, so late at night, and

with such a very busy day tomorrow.’ I assured him that this was unimportant now that I knew that it was his desire to see me.

‘I would not have called for you,’ he continued, ‘if I did not have to reckon with the possibility that it might soon be too late. I will not make it much longer, dominie, and before that moment I want to tell you something. First of all, about the orphanage: I have specified a certain amount in my will, but you know, upon the condition that there is as little publicity as possible.’

I tried to thank him, but it is very difficult under such circumstances to find the right word. It’s just as if one is personally signing the death-sentence of the dying. But with a slight movement of his hands he checked further talk on my part and said:

‘There is something else. You have not known me fully well, not on the inside. I know that you were dissatisfied with me: the Lord’s Supper and perhaps other things, and I am appreciative of the fact that you did not harshly condemn me. Because there was a reason...’ he paused, during which I gave him no encouragement to continue, something which he apparently did not expect either.

And then he told his history. There was not much rising or falling in his voice and yet the telling of his story from the very beginning brought with it so much tension that I could not help but listen very intently, strangely fascinated.

‘I am,’ he began, ‘I am now sixty-three years old, actually still young for dying, and yet it is already so long ago. I was married and my wife passed away when our little girl was three years of age. Dominie,’ he looked at me, ‘you are married and no doubt you love your wife very much. I did, too, and when she died and they carried her away to be buried it was as if they buried my own heart. I was shattered and numb. I lived in emptiness and it was cold, day after day it was cold. Now you must know this too: in my younger years I was very ill-tempered. I was completely careless; when I was about eighteen years old I no longer went to church. My father was already dead and my mother could not control me. I went to the university for a year, but let’s forget about that. I was hot-headed and rude and sometimes dangerous. Until I met my wife...’

He stopped speaking. So involved was I in his story that I knew exactly where his thoughts were. An expression moved across his face which made him look much younger.

He went on: ‘It is even now a mystery to me that she could possibly get to love me, but she did, and she made of me a different—I don’t dare to say a better—but I do say a different man. She was of a gentle character and completely trusting. She trusted me too. She taught me to go back to the church and to believe in the Gospel that I had wanted to forget. I prayed and I gave thanks to God and still do it, even though it is...but that comes later.’

It was a heavy silence in that spacious sickroom... as if the shadows behind had joined to listen to the telling of these things out of the dark past. I asked if he would like something to drink. He nodded and when I put a glass of fruit juice to his lips he very carefully swallowed a mouthful and licked his lips—it was evident that all this was costing him a great deal of effort.

His voice was somewhat hoarse after drinking, but he went on:

‘We had a child, a daughter. Her name was Marijke after my wife, and she resembled her a great deal. I have already told you that my wife died when Marijke was three. I was inconsolably desperate, for she was the only one that I ever really loved, and

love, dominie, is a fearful thing. My old nature came back to the surface. I stood in my room all by myself and cursed God out loud, calling him a brute and a murderer. And then that other thing happened...'

Again he waited. I could sense that this man was battling furiously within himself in order to get across the threshold of silence, that he might reveal the secret that he had so anxiously guarded...and hated. He swallowed a few times and stared straight ahead into the darkness.

'Our child was dear and happy, always happy, and it was just that which I could no longer endure. That was a sickness, but it was also an evil. I can hardly believe it now, and yet I'—his voice dropped to a whisper—'and yet I struck her just because she laughed.' Brokenly he continued: 'I struck her with the back of my hand flush in her face. I was wearing a ring with a small diamond mounting and her cheek bled. I saw that, but I did not take her into my arms and I did not kiss her and I did not say that I was sorry. I simply walked away. She developed blood poisoning and was dead after two days. No one ever suspected it; you are the first one that I have told. I stood at her bedside and she smiled at me once more.'—His voice broke and died away; I saw his lips moving soundlessly:

'Marijke, Marijke...'

'Karmon'—neither could I speak with full voice—'Karmon, you have surely prayed to God for forgiveness?'

There was no answer. He lay very quiet and with a sudden shock the thought rose within me that he might have already died, until I saw the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his breathing. More urgently I repeated my question: 'Karmon, Karmon...'

It was then that he opened his eyes, eyes so full of terror that to look at them was more than shocking. It was as if I were looking with his eyes through two windows into a desolation so deep that no comfort could possibly find place. I couldn't think of anything to say but,

'You know, of course, that there is grace with God? Even the'—I stumbled over that hard word—'even the murderer with Jesus at the Cross received forgiveness.'

Fixedly he kept his eyes on me,

'Yes,' he murmured, 'murderer, that is the right word. But did this murderer of Golgotha murder his own child? A dear innocent child?' it seemed as if he wanted to torture himself with these last words, and he repeated them, 'an innocent child? The murderer, dominie, he was saved, but not Herod who killed the children of Bethlehem.'

Relentlessly he kept his gaze fixed upon me. A strange pressure paralyzed my tongue.

'You think that I am afraid of death?' His mouth twisted as if in sharp pain and his words sounded rough, 'Dominie, I don't dare to meet my wife and child up there!'

It seemed as if everything stiffened all about us. Now I understood. Now I understood the despair of this man and also that behind this despair lay the eager longing of a human heart for final peace.

I stood up and walked to the window and pushing the curtain aside I saw in the earliest grey light of the morning how the naked arms of the trees were lifted imploringly towards heaven and in my imagination I thought I heard the whispering of the dying man: 'Marijke, Marijke...'

I turned myself about, returned to the bed, back to the beseeching eyes which though voiceless pressed me for an answer. Then I told him of Jesus Christ, God's Son, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. He knew that, of course, for he heard and read it many, many times. And yet I had no other message for him than the simple Gospel.

I spoke of a love of God which is so great that it made a light to rise in Christ which drives away all shadows of guilt and remorse, yes, which drives away even the shadows which doubt the reality of His endless mercy.

What else could I say to him? To him who lies broken on the battlefield and burning with thirst one gives a sip of pure water and nothing more.

Then I prayed with him, and when I had finished he looked up at me. It was as if an angel had touched his eyes and cleansed them of all anxiety, of all fear.

'The curtains,' he whispered.

I pushed them aside. Morning light stood before the windows. Karmon looked at the dawn and drank of the rising sun.

I softly left the sickroom, returned home, and then went on to church to bring the glad tidings of him who had made it possible for one to find Christmas even near and on a deathbed.

Now are you all going to say to me, "What a hard story; how is that an encouragement?" But I would submit to you that it is the best of stories because it shows us the truth and the power of the Gospel. The truth is that there is sin and woe and wickedness and pain in this world that we barely know of; so much sin and woe and pain in the life of every single person we rub shoulders with; so much so that if we knew it all we would sink in a world of depression and helplessness every day of our lives. You all know this very well by looking into your own heart—some of which you share with each other and much of it you keep to yourselves. But if we were big enough to see into the hearts of others too—even just the hearts of those around us, let alone the hearts of all of mankind—the sickness, the secrets, the sin and the pain would so weigh us down I'm sure we would barely be able to get out of bed in the morning.

Yet our God KNOWS ALL THIS! He knows every sin, every woe, every hint of wickedness, every pain in every life of every person on this miserable planet. He knows and *still He loves, He saves, He comes, He responds*. He grafted broken lives into His family tree; He sent Himself to live for us, to die on our behalf so that we, like Karmon, might die in peace and live forever in reconciliation. Truth, Girls—hard, bare, unvarnished, wonderful truth—that is the power of the Gospel and that is what we think about, teach our children about, actively waiting for, this Advent season.

**HYMN:**

**Around the Throne of God in Heaven**

**Anne Shepherd/Henry Matthews**

**#543 in *Trinity Hymnal***

Around the throne of God in heaven thousands of children stand,  
Children whose sins are all forgiven, a holy, happy band,

Chorus: singing, "Glory, glory, glory be to God on high."

In flowing robes of spotless white see every one arrayed;  
Dwelling in everlasting light and joys that never fade,

Chorus: singing, "Glory, glory, glory be to God on high."

What brought them to that world above, that heaven so bright and fair,  
Where all is peace, and joy, and love; how came those children there,

Chorus: singing, "Glory, glory, glory be to God on high."

Because the Savior shed his blood to wash away their sin;  
Bathed in that pure and precious flood, behold them white and clean,

Chorus: singing, "Glory, glory, glory be to God on high."

On earth they sought the Savior's grace, on earth they loved his name;  
So now they see his blessed face, and stand before the Lamb,

Singing, "Glory, glory, glory be to God on high."