

MATT RAWLE



THE GIFT OF THE  
*Nutcracker*



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## Chapter One

# CLARA: WAITING FOR CHRISTMAS

*We know that the whole creation has been  
groaning in labor pains until now.*

*Romans 8:22*

Christmas seemed to be a magical time of the year when I was a child. Every year my parents invited me to compose a list of what I hoped would appear under the tree. The list detailed what you might expect: the latest toy, the best new video game, a new bike, and branded baseball equipment. The latest and greatest toys and gadgets were gifts I looked forward to with great anticipation, but not everything made it to my list.

Among the wishes for toys and “things,” I never listed that I wanted the music on the radio to change to joyful melodies

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accompanied by sleigh bells. I never wrote down that I hoped the houses in our neighborhood would be glowing with lights. I failed to add my excitement about family coming into town to share a meal and gathering with my church family to sing “Silent Night” by candlelight. Music, lights, family, and worship were left off my list, not because they were unimportant, but because I knew that they would happen. Getting the best baseball helmet on the market was a longshot, but singing with my sisters at the Christmas Eve candlelight service was a blessed given.

What do you hope will happen this Advent and Christmas season? What are you expecting to happen? Which of your traditions seem so certain that writing them down on a wish list seems irrelevant? Many churches welcome the Advent season by lighting candles to welcome Jesus into the world, anticipating the peace, hope, love, and joy Christ continues to offer to us. How might our worship change if we lit a candle giving thanks for peace that we enjoy, rather than what we anticipate in the fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic prophecy—“Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)? Could it be that one day love will be so prevalent that writing love on a wish list seems irrelevant?

For now, we wait. Like Clara, the one who leads us through this fantastic Nutcracker story, we hope that the gifts under the tree will match the picture of the world in our imagination. We just might discover that the world that awaits is even more grand than what we could ever imagine!

### 1. THE STAGE IS SET

You’re sitting in the audience, and the lights begin to dim. The conductor walks to the podium accompanied with a polite

but graceful applause. An oboe offers a steady and crisp “A-440” from which a cacophony of sound slowly erupts, as if something magnificent is awakening. And then...a hint of silence before the baton is lifted and the curtain raised. That pivotal moment between the swell of orchestral chaos and the rising curtain is where the season of Advent lives. Advent, celebrated during the four Sundays prior to Christmas, is a curious season of anticipation for something we know has happened, but has not yet come to fruition. This silent anticipation is a “here and yet not” experience. It’s like sitting in the audience for Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*. Even if you’ve never seen the ballet, you most likely have some cultural knowledge of the story. The Sugar Plum Fairy, dancing candies, and toy soldiers have graced the stage since 1892, and yet in that moment before the curtain rises, the show has not begun.

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Christian New Year, in which the church gathers to hear words from the Hebrew Scriptures that point to a coming Messiah who will fulfill God’s promise of everlasting peace and salvation.

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’*

*Jeremiah 33:14-16*

Scriptures ring out with words of an everlasting kingdom built on foundations of justice, righteousness, safety, and fulfillment. It’s

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easy to see how many understood the Messiah to be an earthly ruler who would establish an independent government, but as the story unfolds in the coming weeks, our worldly expectations are turned upside down, our curiosities piqued.

Curiosity and anticipation go hand in hand. It's like the children in the beginning of the Nutcracker story. Clara, the young girl around whom the story is told, peeks through a keyhole from the family drawing room to see if she can catch sight of what's happening on the other side of the locked door. She can hear the frivolity and catch a fleeting glimpse of dancing, but she can't quite see what she knows is there—the presents under the tree. Presents are a beautiful example of how curiosity and anticipation need each other. A wrapped present under the living room Christmas tree offers a hint of what the gift might be—especially if wrapped creatively, the package suggesting the actual shape of the gift—but because we don't quite know what lies underneath the paper and bow, we are filled with an infectious interest.

Most of us have heard the Christmas story of angels, shepherds, and a silent night, so the Advent anticipation isn't necessarily about how Scripture announces Christ's birth; the anticipation we feel is the curiosity of how God continues to work through Christ from such a humble beginning. It is true that Christ's life, suffering, death, and resurrection confirmed God's promise of an everlasting covenant of eternal life, but there is great work to be done until the world lives in peace, hope, love, and joy. Without a curiosity that calls us into God's continuous work in the world, there is little to anticipate. If you know what gift awaits you under the tree, you aren't holding your breath until Christmas Day. You are certainly thankful for an obvious gift, and most Sundays of the year our worship centers on thanksgiving and praise. Advent is different—our thankfulness is overshadowed by an anticipation born out of

curiosity over how a child wrapped in swaddling clothes will save our souls and continue to transform the world.

Clara waits on the other side of the door with a joy she does not yet understand. She's told that the children cannot enter the room until the Christmas tree is lit. I love how light is what invites the children into the party. Light is what invites us into Advent. I remember the first time my wife and I put up a Christmas tree. To say that we added lights to the tree would be an understatement. I lovingly call our first Christmas tree as a married couple "The Bethlehem Supernova." It was like staring into the sun, and my wife couldn't have been more delighted. Since then, the lights on the tree have tapered, but the presence of light hasn't dimmed. We put lights on the tree, on our home, on the mantel, and keep them perpetually burning in the fireplace. The light simply moved from the tree to shine from anything that didn't move!

Light is such an inviting way to welcome the coming light of Christ. In the sanctuary in our church we light candles each week during Advent to light the way, so to speak, on the path to Christmas. This Christmas journey takes us through peace, hope, love, and joy, with the sanctuary lights growing brighter until the entire sanctuary sings "Silent Night" by candlelight. This one, single candle of peace grows to fill the entire sanctuary dancing about in every prayerful hand in much the same way that the light of Christ from a lowly manger grew to change the world. How do you use light in your Christmas decorations? How do you tell Christ's story through light?

In the ballet, once the Christmas tree is lit, the children patiently waiting on the other side of the door are welcomed into the party, and the tree seems larger than life. I remember as a child that the Christmas tree seemed to tower over everything else in the house, but now I can reach the angel at the top with little aid.



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Do you remember the tree being larger when you were younger? It's not really about the size of the tree, is it? When I was younger, Christmas meant something different. It was magical and exciting, and nothing else in the world seemed to matter. Today I've grown to realize that it's not about what's under the tree, but those who surround it that matter. Truth be told, this only adds to its magic, excitement, and meaning.

As looming as the tree was for Clara and her friends, it wasn't the tree that had the children's attention. The gifts around the tree held their gaze. Even though the people around the tree are the true gift of Christmas, there's something quite meaningful about giving to others during the Christmas season. I often wonder why we aren't so generous other times of the year. Is it the music, the weather, the end-of-the-year bonus, or do we maybe feel more at peace when Christ is a child? How might we capture that sense of excitement and generosity throughout the year? Maybe it's as simple as continuing a spirit of curiosity and anticipation for God's wonderful and amazing work. My morning prayer most days is "What do you have in store for me today, Lord?" It is an exciting and terrifying thought.

## 2. IN BETWEEN

*The Nutcracker* is a story told through the eyes of a twelve-year-old child, and Clara's age offers us a unique perspective on a celebration as meaningful as Christmas. The doorway blocking Clara's entrance into the Christmas party fills her with a sense of anticipation for what lies on the other side, but the doorway represents much more in our story. Clara is on the outside looking in. Being twelve years old, she's no longer a child, but she's not quite an adult, either. She's caught in this "in between" stage of life

through which the Nutcracker's story is told. Clara is welcomed into a party with adults, but she's offered a toy as a gift. The gift is precious, something an older child would appreciate, but her younger brother steals it and breaks it. In her dream, she is welcomed into a grand party, but she has to fight off monsters in order to get there. The doorway directly represents a rite of passage between childhood and adolescence.

My oldest daughter is almost twelve years old. On the one hand, she still seems like a child. I see her skipping home from the bus stop in the afternoons after school, she refuses to go upstairs if the lights are off, and convincing her to eat certain vegetables at dinner is an exercise in the art of negotiation. On the other hand, we are living in uncharted parental territory. She texts friends about weekend plans, asks difficult questions that simple answers cannot satisfy, and cares very much about unique fashion trends. She wants privacy, but doesn't want to feel alone. She wants freedom to make her own decisions, but also the security of forgiveness when things don't work out. She wants to sit with her friends during Christmas Eve worship, but she loves when it's just the six of us watching *White Christmas* while Santa's cookies are baking late into the evening. Truth be told, maybe this "in between" stage of life lasts longer than we want to admit.

Maybe this is why *The Nutcracker* has captured our holiday imagination. Living through this "in between" stage is something we all know on some level, whether we remember the complexity of our own middle school years or have lived through parenting someone in this stage. Being a Christian is an "in between" kind of life. Paul encourages us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2). We are citizens of heaven while sojourning on earth. We have one foot in the sanctuary and the other foot in the office. Of

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course, the kingdom of God is not located in the center of a Venn diagram with heaven on one side and the earth on the other. We can sometimes feel like we are in between worlds, but what we sense as “in between” is actually growth.

The end of Luke 2 offers us a poignant picture of what it looks like to grow within this “in-between” life:

*Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.*

*And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.*

*Luke 2:41-52*

Interestingly, the only story we have of Jesus' childhood is when he was twelve. What's more curious is that Luke tells us Jesus grew in wisdom. You might expect that the Messiah was born knowing all that he needed to know about the world, but that's not the story we have. Can you imagine Jesus looking through a keyhole with expectation of what lies on the other side? It certainly gives me a joyful hope that even Jesus used his time on earth to discover and learn about the world. This is also a humbling text for the times I think I have everything figured out.

I've offered a Christmas Eve message for many years, and long before Advent, when I'm planning our Christmas Eve service, I usually sit at the computer with a sense of dread. What am I supposed to say about a text that the congregation has heard so many times that they can recite it from memory? Pastors are often guilty of trying to be witty and enlightening from the pulpit every week instead of simply letting Scripture speak for itself. Surprisingly, every year as we journey closer to celebrating the Nativity, the Holy Spirit always offers me something new to ponder. It fills me with such excitement to offer a new idea every year before singing "Silent Night," but it also gives me a sense of great humility (and even embarrassment) when I look back at previous Christmas Eve sermons and realize how much I didn't truly understand the text as I do in the current moment. This spiritual growth is a joyful humbling that I hope never ceases.

What may be more to the point in Luke's story of Jesus' adolescence is how "in between" isn't either/or, but a both/and. Jesus grew both in wisdom *and* years and in divine *and* human favor. "Wisdom and years" is like the saying that knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad. "Human and divine" helps us recognize that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. As Christians, we don't need

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to have one foot in the sanctuary and one in the office. The goal is for worship to be productive and the office to be worshipful so that we work to build God's kingdom in all aspects of our lives. When we put both feet in both places, we begin to realize that God's kingdom is always the rock on which we stand.

Seeing the Christmas tree through Clara's twelve-year-old eyes reminds us that being "in between" is always where we find ourselves. By God's grace we are always learning, growing, and being transformed by the renewing of our mind. We are always on one side of a door looking through a keyhole or "in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The point is to keep searching, learning, and growing so that one day we will find ourselves complete within the heart of God.

### 3. TRADITION

Annual Christmas traditions help ground us in our ever-changing, "in between" lives. As crazy as our day-to-day lives can be, we can rest assured of the singing of "Silent Night" by candlelight, opening presents around the tree, and hearing "Jingle Bells" on the radio to the point where we are tired of hearing "Jingle Bells" on the radio. What are some of the traditions you most look forward to each year? Do they happen in the sanctuary or in the living room? Do they involve only your closest loved ones or a large group celebration? Do you long for Christmas Day itself or find more joy in the prior days of preparation?

One of the reasons why Clara is waiting with great expectation to enter into the Christmas party is because she knows what to expect. But not everything goes to plan. One of my favorite Christmas traditions is going to a tree farm to select our perfect tree, and the Advent season two years ago began like any other. We returned

# When the most unexpected gift is the greatest of them all...

*The Nutcracker* was first performed in 1892 and quickly became a holiday tradition, one that continues for many families to this day. In *The Gift of the Nutcracker*, Matt Rawle takes a look at this Christmas classic in a new way—through the lens of faith. Rawle uses the iconic tale to help us understand God’s greatest gift of the Christ child and of the kingdom Christ came to build. Much like Clara, we are all caught in an Advent season, pondering a most extraordinary gift. Complete with devotions capping each chapter, this book can be read alone or is perfectly suited for use in a small group.

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Matt Rawle has become the go-to guy for those intrigued by the intersection of Christ and culture. He does not disappoint in *The Gift of the Nutcracker*. Christian themes, like parables, can be detected in much Christmas music that isn’t blatantly Christian—and Rawle helps us see how, and then experience the festive holiday season more deeply. —**James Howell**, Senior Pastor, Myers Park UMC, Charlotte, NC

As always, Matt Rawle writes with incredible clarity and yet still finds a way to be artistic in his story telling. Matt’s ability to simultaneously speak as a theologian, a musician, a father and husband, and an apparent under-the-radar ballerino is engaging in new and fresh ways. —**Taylor Scott Davis**, Composer and Director of Music and Worship at St. Andrew UMC, Plano, TX  
<http://www.taylorsscottdavis.com/>

Here he goes again. Matt Rawle has a unique way of engaging readers. His use of familiar stories immediately draws people in. There are few who are more imaginative, more creative than Matt Rawle. —**Cynthia Fierro Harvey**, Bishop, Louisiana Conference of The United Methodist Church



**Matt Rawle** is Lead Pastor at Asbury United Methodist Church in Bossier City, Louisiana. Matt is an international speaker who loves to tell an old story in a new way, especially at the intersection of pop culture and the church. His book series, *The Pop in Culture*, includes *The Faith of a Mockingbird*, *Hollywood Jesus*, *The Salvation of Doctor Who*, *The Redemption of Scrooge*, and *What Makes a Hero?*

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