

Family Worship Kicks off Celebration of Advent

Every Sunday, during Advent, one family gets up at the beginning of the church service to read the devotional, text, and prayer. This Sunday's candle was Love, and it was our turn. So I carefully dressed Evelyn in her older sister's hand-me-down Christmas dress, but the older two couldn't be bothered: fashionista Anne wanted to wear harem pants and a lotus dress, pragmatic Joseph preferred his red hockey t-shirt.

Initially, I handed Brian the full reading and text we were given without thought. Probably I would stand, beatifically, madonna-like, no doubt, surrounded by my children, behind him, supportive.

This up-front-stuff is the part of worship that The Daddy does, I defaulted, without thinking, slipping into my old pastor-wife groove. It was my husband who said, "No, this is Advent, and it's church, and we're a family: we're all in this. Together." (Usually, he's the one reminding me that those old ways don't fit a Jesus-shaped life, not anymore.)

Of course, Anne was thrilled. There is no timidity or fear in her, she dances through church. One day, a friend of mine came over to me, with tears in her eyes, and said, "I know it might be odd but I need to tell that I think I heard a word from God about Anne. I was watching her dance, and somehow, in my heart, I heard Jesus say, "I love to watch her dance for me. It makes me so happy."

Isn't Jesus happy when children are happy in his Presence?

Now, all on her own, Anne often goes into a quiet room, turns on praise music, and spins and dances, just her and (I imagine, I wouldn't be surprised) an Audience of One, dancing

with her even. (I cried when my friend told me that Jesus was happy about Anne's dancing. I tucked another moment into my own heart, Mary-like, we know what it is to ponder and remember for the rest of a life.)

Joseph is my singer, my worshipper. He memorizes the words to songs, and is always singing under his breath. I didn't realize how easily songs came to him until I heard him singing to himself all the time, just working on puzzles, singing all the songs I sing. He loves to sit in the very front of church, but I'm a back-row soul so we usually clash about where to sit in church. Every once in a while, we end up in the very front, and he watches and learns, and he wants me to hold him close during worship, so I sing the words right into his ears (and Brian chases Evelyn back and forth across the gym because, have mercy, that child never sits still). He told me, in his Cookie-Monster boy-voice, that he wants to sing songs always, and someday, that will be him making up songs and playing the guitar. His favourite song, his top-of-the-lungs-gracious-that-is-loud-bellowing-song, is Matt Redman's Bless the Lord, Oh My Soul. And he means every word of it.

So Anne ran on stage, and I followed in her confident wake, sedate, the matriarch of this little tribe. Brian handed the microphone to Anne, and my girl, she read it strong: "This morning we light the second candle and we remember Love."

The sound of her girlish voice through the speakers, rang out, in bell-ringing-clear proclaiming.

Brian sat down on the stage beside her and Joe, and he read, in his midwest man voice, "In a manger on that incredible night Love was born. Mary held Love in her arms. The shepherds from the fields came to worship Love. Years later, Wisemen would come to bring gifts to the King Love. Here was Love born to us. Love grew and touched those who could not be touched. Love forgave those who would not be forgiven. Love listened to those who had no one to listen to them. Love prayed for those

who did not love him. Love gave life to those who were caught in the grasp of death. Love willingly died so that our sins were removed, forgiven, and so we could be face to face with God."

Anne took the microphone again, and prayed, "May we be teachable to love like Jesus himself."

Then I took the microphone and began to read the Scriptures. I had Evelynn balanced on my cocked hip, and I wasn't nervous. For once in my life, holding a microphone, I wasn't nervous. My daughters, my husband, my son, were all here with me, there was no need to fear because this, this was communal worship: not a performance.

"And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love," I read from 1 John.

Then Evelynn grabbed the mic out of my hand and hollered "LOVE!" into it, bursting out laughing at the sound of her own loud voice. I laughed, too, relieved, and joked that we were raising a preacher in this one. (Seriously, this girl.)

"Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us."

I handed the microphone to Brian, thinking we were done, but Joseph took his Dad's arm, pulled it down to his wide mouth, and solemnly said, "A-men" in benediction. I lit the candles with a fireplace clicker thing, we walked back to our seats to sit amongst our friends.

I think the Kingdom of God looks like children, men, and women in worship together. We wait in the darkness together, so we

worship together. Aren't we all a picture of the restored life in the full light of day, how this new life means all are welcome?

So that the Kingdom of God is yeast and seed, and also a slender little girl, dancing for Jesus alone, and one little boy, singing songs, and one little family leading worship for the community, and one more candle burning, on a lampstand, lighting the whole room. It's Angels on a hillside with common shepherds, and Kings in stables, and virgins having babies. It's the uneducated Galileans as ambassadors for God, and murderous Pharisees as great apostles, it's Mary Magdalene charged with announcing the resurrection, and little children as our examples.

So my children lead worship right alongside of the grown-ups, and their mama reads Scripture right alongside of the men, and their dad is the one who willingly gave up his own time in the lead, for the joy of giving his most-loved-ones a chance to worship out loud, too.

Isn't it beautiful, all together? Isn't it beautiful when young and old, male and female, rich and poor, broken and beautiful, all gather for Emmanuel, God with us?

Come, Lord Jesus, among us, and until you do, I have a little girl who wants to dance, and a boy who wants to sing, and a baby who wants to preach, a husband with a leader's mind and a servant's posture and a heart after God, and me, I am learning to be not afraid but to speak truth in love.

It's just a small incarnational moment, hardly worth noticing for most of the world, but for me, this was a metaphor moment of life in the Kingdom, life in the glorious truth of worship in spirit and truth, Jesus-shaped leadership as servanthood, and so our family's lighting of another candle within community, with their affirmation and prayers and participation, pushed back just a bit more of the darkness,

and then we scattered back out again.

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