



# EVERYTHING BELONGS

Waiting in the Darkness  
an Advent Bonus

Mike Petrow: Greetings, everyone. Happy Advent. Merry Christmas and welcome to a special bonus episode of the Everything Belongs podcast. I'm Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Drew Jackson: And I'm Drew Jackson.

Mike Petrow: Hey, it's always great to be with the two of you. And what a joy it was to record this fantastic conversation with you both.

Paul Swanson: Seriously, it's always fun to be in conversation with both of you and just to hear the ruminations of what's stirring in your hearts this Advent and how you reflected upon that, and some of your practices that tip over into Christmas. I feel like I've walked away with more than I could have ever anticipated being in conversation with the two of you today.

Drew Jackson: Absolutely. I feel similarly, Paul, there's always so much to reflect on during this season, the season of Advent. And I'm so grateful to be in conversation with the two of you to be able to deepen those reflections and help bring me personally, and I hope all of our listeners, into the significance of this season.

Mike Petrow: Right on. Right on. Well folks, if you haven't figured it out, this is a special bonus episode of the Everything Belongs podcast. We're going to take a break from our chapter-by-chapter Exploration of Eager to Love, although we are going to jump ahead and talk about one of the appendices chapters, which I think is called the Dynamic Unity Between Jesus and the Cosmic Christ. You don't have to read that to listen to this episode, and in point of fact, we don't actually talk about it that much to be very honest, but the conversations are great.

So Paul and I are going to zip over to Richard's house because we're here in New Mexico and have a conversation with him about the significance of Advent and Christmas, and then we're going to come back and hang out with Drew, get to hear some of his poetry, and have a fantastic conversation about the Advent season, the Christmas season, and how we can all make it extra special and sacred at this time. Thanks both of you for being here.

Paul Swanson: Thanks, Mike. Thanks, Drew.

Drew Jackson: Thanks.

Mike Petrow: From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Drew Jackson: And I'm Drew Jackson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Greetings, friends. Welcome back to another episode of Everything Belongs podcast. It's so great to be here with Paul Swanson. I have been looking forward to this for weeks because I love talking about Christmas. And even more than that, I love talking about Advent. But before we jump in, how are you doing, Mr. Swanson?

Paul Swanson: I'm good Mr. Petrow. It's always a gift to be here with the two of you. And like you, I'm a big fan of Advent, the coming of the light in the midst of the darkness, so it's a gift to be here together.

Mike Petrow: Absolutely. And Richard, how are you doing today?

Richard Rohr: Okay. Despite my aging voice, I am unwell.

Mike Petrow: Right on.

Richard Rohr: You two are such natural lead ins. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: Oh,

Thank you, thank you.

Richard Rohr: Thank you. You're like TV hosts.

Mike Petrow: Well, it is fun, and we enjoy it. And our listeners can't see it, but Opie is cuddled up on Richard's lap like he's sitting down by a warm Christmas fire. He's pretty content today.

Richard Rohr: He is. He's happy.

Mike Petrow: He was zipping around.

Richard Rohr: [inaudible 00:03:31] because you're here.

Mike Petrow: He and I got to have our joyful reunion, and now he's just soaking up all the love. Goodness gracious.

Paul Swanson: Hey, Richard, it's so fun to be here. We're in the midst of Advent. It just kicked off. And it's one of those seasons that depending on the tradition you grow up in, you have different experiences, relationships to it. What do you think the significance of Advent as a season is in the Christian calendar?

Richard Rohr: Well, the obvious answer we're supposed to give, and I guess it's true, is to create waiting, to create expectation, to create desire. And the church gives us a full four weeks to do it. I think children know how to create desire, an expectation, but I don't know that we do. Maybe we do and we just don't talk about it, but you have two children, you know what I mean?

Paul Swanson: No, they love it.

Richard Rohr: They just get... Expectation is the thing itself.

Paul Swanson: That's it. I mean, the way that Opie was zipping around earlier was just like it's them each morning now with their Advent calendar, they cannot wait to start the day by opening the little door of the cardboard to get that little chocolate piece.

Mike Petrow: I'm impressed that they wait. My brother would eat all the candy right away and then close the doors, so it looked like he didn't, and then he would sneak and steal my sister and I's

right before.

Paul Swanson: That's amazing.

Mike Petrow: Oh, I love a good Advent calendar.

Richard Rohr: Kids.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I remember being a child of the eighties, the J.C Penney's catalog would come. We would each be given a Sharpie marker, and we would go through the toy section and circle the toys that we wanted for Christmas.

And I kind of, in a way, I love Christmas, but even as a child, I think the anticipation to me was more exciting than the actual event.

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. That's what I was starting to feel or say. The expectation is the thing.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: It's an end in itself. And just to add on quickly, we live in a culture with so much instant satisfaction that we don't know how to do that anymore. We have satisfaction every day with good meals, good clothes, good TV, good movies, so we don't live in expectation. We don't need it.

Paul Swanson: That's what I was thinking about, the delayed gratification of-

Richard Rohr: Delay.

Paul Swanson: Living in that desire before consummation, before the fulfillment of-

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: ... That desire.

Mike Petrow: One of my favorites; so I have two traditions. I'll say more about Charles Dickens Christmas Carols, a huge part of my Advent tradition. I'll say more about that later, but also Henri Nouwen gave a fantastic talk on Advent called the Spirituality of Waiting. And Nouwen's delivery is so slow that he's like "waiting is." And you're just waiting for him to make the point, so the form follows function, but he talks about working with prisoners and how prisoners spend so much time waiting and how that lends and insight into what it means.

I'm curious, Richard, you worked for years as a prison chaplain. Did that give you any insight, again, in such a privileged culture where we get what we want as quick as we want it? There's got to be a [inaudible 00:07:20].

Richard Rohr: I haven't reflected on it enough. It surely must be true. I'm afraid, my memory is more their resentment at having to wait.

Mike Petrow: Sure, of course.

Richard Rohr: Because so many were there unjustly, at least in their own mind, so it wasn't a happy-

Mike Petrow: No.

Richard Rohr: ... Waiting.

Mike Petrow: Well, but that's the other side of the Advent expression, is this hearkening back to the waiting for the Messiah in the midst of difficulty and suffering, and waiting through difficulty, if I understand correctly.

Paul Swanson: In that spirit of that question, I was thinking too about, I just saw this chart about how people spend their time throughout the various seasons of life. And of course, as people get older, they spend more and more time alone. I'm curious, as somebody who's now 81, what is waiting feel like as an 81-year-old versus as a younger person? As you see that I've lived to the entire span of different seasons of waiting and fulfillment.

Richard Rohr: The first thing that comes to mind is it's much easier. You know how I talk about gazing? The reason I can even do that is because I'm 81. I don't think when I was 21 I could have gazed for an hour and a half. I wonder why that is. Because there's a fullness already within you, your life, that you're constantly drawing upon. Yeah, that's what comes to mind. I don't know whether it's the best answer.

Mike Petrow: No, I love that though, of there being a fullness that you're already drawing-

Richard Rohr: Already drawing upon. It is so easy. I've just been loving these golden leaves in my tree. This tree is so wonderful. It doesn't drop its leaves like the others do. It stays golden for the whole early winter.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: And then early spring, they drop, and I get ready for the green.

Mike Petrow: That's amazing.

It's an interesting, I think, again, I love the anticipation, looking towards Christmas when I was a kid. And then when I got older and I learned more of, again, that notion of waiting. I think my favorite Christmas song of all time is, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Every version of it, so-

Richard Rohr: Yeah. Isn't that true?

Paul Swanson: I'm with you.

Mike Petrow: Ransom captive Israel.

Richard Rohr: Always sung on the Advent Sundays. It's a haunting melody.

Mike Petrow: And then realizing, for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere, this is the time when the daylight is the shortest. And it didn't even occur to me. We put Christmas lights out, but we're actually doing is we're lighting the season where it's mostly dark. I can't help but think in the moment we live, in the world that we live in, there's so much to be distressed about, and there is so much work to be done. And we're not saying there's not, but I wonder what the insight there is in shining a light in the dark in this season. What do you think Advent teaches us, Richard, about finding hope in difficult times?

Richard Rohr: I don't know whether it automatically teaches it. I know you weren't saying that, but you already put your finger on it. There's something about wanting to put light when the light is getting less and less. You drive the neighborhoods, I haven't much yet this year, and you say what forever makes people want to put this many lights in their front yard?" I hate to see their electric bill. But they do, and they do it every year.

And now there's TV shows just traveling the front yards of America, seeing who's outdoing one another, but people are genuinely, genuinely excited about. And the why of it, I think it's archetypal. It's not logical. It's we're going to light up this damn darkness with beauty. What comes to me is the line from Francis where he said "On Christmas, even the walls should eat meat."

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: Even abstemious Francis gave us permission on Christmas to go to excess.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, well, because right. He was an ascetic and he wouldn't have been tasted eaten food that tasted good or any of that.

Richard Rohr: On Christmas even the walls should eat meat. He said, we should spread meat on the walls.

Paul Swanson: Oh my God.

Richard Rohr: He always was a man of immense imagery.

Mike Petrow: I don't know. What would be the food that you would spread on the walls to celebrate [inaudible 00:12:47]?

Paul Swanson: Oh, goodness. There's this Swedish food called Lefse, which is kind of like a potato tortilla, but that's the first thing that came to mind as far as a-

Richard Rohr: A potato?

Paul Swanson: It's like a potato tortilla in a way. You put butter and cinnamon and sugar on and roll it up, or you can put other things inside of it.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: But it's delicious. It's a Scandinavian treat in my world. How about you?

Mike Petrow: Oh, man. Goodness. I was not prepared to answer the question that I asked you. I'll go last. Richard, what's your favorite celebration food of choice? What would be your putting meat

on the walls?

Richard Rohr: That I would-

Mike Petrow: It's your favorite guilty indulgence.

Richard Rohr: Of all the tastes, I only came to this a few years ago. Sweet, sour, creamy is the one that is most luscious to me.

Mike Petrow: Oh, wow.

Richard Rohr: So I guess I'd spread some eggnog.

Mike Petrow: Oh my God. I love eggnog.

Richard Rohr: I love creamy.

Mike Petrow: That's great to know. I think our listeners are going to send in just cartons of eggnog.

Paul Swanson: There you go.

Mike Petrow: [inaudible 00:13:54].

Paul Swanson: Before you go, Mike, what was the thing that Francis would always eat on Christmas? Wasn't there-

Richard Rohr: Almond cakes.

Mike Petrow: That's right.

Richard Rohr: That's the one excess he allowed himself.

Mike Petrow: And isn't that Jacoba sent him that on his deathbed?

Richard Rohr: His women friends found out about it, and they'd bring him almond cakes, so we normally have them on his feast day.

Mike Petrow: I love that.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, that's great.

Mike Petrow: I love that. I think my... I don't know. Everything. [inaudible 00:14:26]. Yeah, there's a lot of fancy things I like, and so my indulgence is probably a good piece of pizza, honestly. Well, and I love, I've said this before, I have an Orthodox priest friend who several of us Protestants were getting ready to fast for Lent or something. And he said, "You Western Christians never understand that every fast needs to be followed with commensurate feast." The point of fasting is to prepare you for the celebration. That's not asceticism for asceticism's sake. So I love to hear that in Francis as well.

Richard Rohr: That's good.

Mike Petrow: Our mutual friend brother Mark used to tell me that the Franciscans were the ones who made Christmas the holiday that it is.

Richard Rohr: Oh, it's true. Easter was, and it deserves to be the great feast of transformation, but after the 13th century, Christmas rose in ascendancy. And many blame, thank Francis for that because he made such a big deal of it. The crib itself, it became a total in enactment. And then the statement about the meat, even the walls should eat meat.

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious.

Richard Rohr: It's because incarnation was already transformation. Christmas was already Easter for the Franciscans.

Mike Petrow: That's fantastic.

Richard Rohr: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Wow. Incarnation was already transformation. I like that a lot. I like that a lot.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it's so significant. I mean, I feel like that's one of the great Franciscan contributions.

Richard Rohr: It is. It is. In all fairness. Opie, you want a little...

Paul Swanson: Hear all the talk about the meat.

Mike Petrow: I know. He got excited.

[inaudible 00:16:19] the same meat. He knows that he would spread on the walls. Goodness gracious. I do like a really good barbecue brisket. I'm not going to lie.

Richard Rohr: You two are such good interviewers.

Mike Petrow: Well, so in talking about-

Richard Rohr: You can get me interested.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I mean, I know. Now we're all hungry. We should go for lunch after this.

Mike Petrow: In talking about Christmas and the miraculous component of it, Richard, you tell a story about having a mystical experience near a Christmas tree as a child that has become the [inaudible 00:16:50]. Would you tell us the story? And I'll admit, I actually don't know the story that well, so you can tell it to me like I'm hearing it for the first time.

Richard Rohr: Profound and long.

Mike Petrow: Sure.

Richard Rohr: But I can still picture the living room and the house we lived in at that point. We lived right caddy corner from my kindergarten school. And we had bought and decorated the tree. I



think we bought it. We never went out and cut it down. We finished the decoration, and the family retired to the kitchen, and I stayed. The whole room had become dark except for the tree. And I just swirled in love. This is what it's all about, lighting up the dark with beautiful colors and bringing nature inside the unnatural, the house.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: That's all. I remember, I didn't want to even lose it by going into the kitchen where everybody was talking. I just wanted to stay there amidst the swirl of sweetness. But a Christmas tree isn't very hard to imagine for a little kid, but it certainly was one of my earliest religious experiences.

Paul Swanson: Were you able to articulate that or did you just let that settle in as a six-year-old boy? How did-

Richard Rohr: Well, I don't think I thought about it that much for years, but then as I got older and tried to chart the growth of my own religiosity, I recognized that was a key moment which gave place and thing to my understanding of religion.

Mike Petrow: Jungian say that if you can remember your first significant dream or that mystical experience as a child, it actually shows you the trajectory of your entire life.

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Richard Rohr: Why did he say so many good things?

Mike Petrow: That's beautiful, Richard. I love that. The lighting, the darkness with beauty, and then the bringing nature inside. I hear a lot of your theology in that experience.

Richard Rohr: Wow, thank you. Yeah.

Paul Swanson: I'm struck by that bringing the natural in the unnatural settings. And that is so much of the work that you have done, is to create a one out of two.

Richard Rohr: Oh, thank you.

Paul Swanson: There's a yin and a yang to that. And I think in this appendix, the title itself gets to that point, the dynamic unity between Jesus of Nazareth and the cosmic Christ. Of course, you didn't come up with that, but you are poetically pointing to the theological cornerstone of Christianity.

For our purposes here, what is that dynamic unity between Jesus and the cosmic Christ, and why does it matter, do you think, to the common person?

Richard Rohr: It's the ability to put the now and the here and the concrete together with the always and everywhere and universal. Great religion does that for you. They're linked intrinsically. If they're not, you're always trying to fly out of this now and here and concrete to get to the so-called spiritual, but when the two become one and you can enjoy Jesus in universal form everywhere and always, you're home free. You don't need to create for yourself apparitions or miracles. I was ashamed when I began studying the gospels, and I wasn't that impressed by

the miracle stories. Not that I doubted Jesus could work miracles, but it was sort of a, “So what? Of course.” The whole thing, the whole dang thing is a miracle, like Einstein says.

And that is the heart of the mystical mind. When you really see that and you really believe that, like this golden cottonwood in my front yard, it sends me into awe. And it’s just a tree and a cremation outside. I don’t have to bring it in, my mind and heart brings it in. What is this coming together? Religio. You’ve heard me talk about some, religament, the seeming opposites.

Yeah. That’s been my life’s desire, which I sometimes achieved in my own mind. They let me choose the picture for my new book. Did you see it?

Paul Swanson: Yeah. It’s beautiful.

Richard Rohr: And I’ve never seen that picture before, but one reason I like it is if you look at my head, it’s half light and half dark. And I said, “My God, that’s my head.”

Mike Petrow: That’s pretty great.

Paul Swanson: That’s amazing.

Richard Rohr: You like the picture, Paul?

Paul Swanson: I think it’s great. It’s very striking. I can see it from here. I just want to, just to point out, we started out this conversation talking about your experiences as a six-year-old under the Christmas tree. And you keep referencing back to this golden tree out front, which you say it doesn’t have to come indoors, but to me, there’s something about you seeing in that one particular tree, you could see it was the beginning of seeing particular trees as gateways into the eternal.

Richard Rohr: I’m very German in that. The Germans love trees. They told me that more than once, they worshiped them before Christianity. And that’s why St. Boniface-

Siri: Here’s what I found.

Richard Rohr: Cut down the tree. I should take this thing off.

Paul Swanson: That’s okay.

Mike Petrow: I bet you found you some good information about trees.

Paul Swanson: We’re going to add Siri as a co-host. That’s right. It’s going to work out.

Richard Rohr: What is it that such a large object could grow out of the earth and be so beautiful? I find trees inherently spiritual, religious.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I think between your teaching on gazing and then all three of our mutual friend Belden Lane, who wrote *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, and talks about his experience praying with trees and learning about the dendrites, these monks that would go up and pray in trees, so many of my Sunday morning hikes result with me saying the Jesus prayer up in

the limbs of a tree anymore.

Richard Rohr: You climb up.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: You're such a four, such a creative four.

Mike Petrow: But there is something about the still stability and the old wisdom of a good tree.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: So I have a bit of a long question now based off of this chapter that I think about. It particularly relates to our moment in time right now. So one of the things I've been noticing in talking with friends is how much disembodiment, disconnecting of spirit and matter is happening by our overly connectedness in virtual space, whether it's through AI or-

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: ... Through avatars or online communities. And I feel like in Eager to Love in particular, you teach this way of incarnational mysticism. And it points to this world of flesh and bone, water and dirt. You're inviting us into this re-enchantment of the dynamic unity inside the salvific Christ mystery. How do we learn to live in this time where so much of our lives are lived online? In a way, it feels like it's pulling us away from the incarnational mysticism or incarnational reality and pulls us away from listening to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth because we split our lives between what we do with our bodies, spirit matter, and what we do online.

And this all started by reading this appendix and just thinking through the eternal Christ and Jesus of Nazareth being one in this mystery of Jesus walking around on earth. Does that make... I still feel like it's a bit of a fragmented question, but I think it's because of the fragmented way in which we're participating in reality right now.

Richard Rohr: There's more and more evidence and reference on TV to how the internet is not just splitting us, but scattering the mind. Scattering the psyche, particularly of young people and teenagers, where everybody's opinion matters too much. Does she like me? Does he like me? Am I popular? Am I good-looking? It's giving you too many reference points for the self. And I mean, people are attributing all kind of mental and emotional illness. I don't know if it's true. I see them even come to my door here, very disturbed people.

My first years of living here, because I'm separate and apart, I didn't bother to lock the screen door, but now I have to. There's people who come to the door. I don't know where their mind is or how it's working. It's not working like I thought minds were supposed to work. You can't blame me. It's all on screens, but the screen changing moment by moment is scattering the psyche is the easiest way I can see it for many people. If they don't have, let's get back to my dang overused metaphor of order, disorder, if you don't have some order in place and you start with screens, I think you start with disorder. And that's not good. Only people who have an order in place can handle a screen that changes with every tap of your finger. Wow. You and I can handle it because we had a life before the screen, but I don't

know that kids can.

Mike Petrow: I'm not always sure that I can, to be honest.

Richard Rohr: What'd you say?

Mike Petrow: Is that I'm not always sure that I can. It is a very diffusive way to live. And it also, it can be beguiling in a lot of ways. I think about, and this is, listeners, nobody take this the wrong way, but I think about this, even this seductive lore of performative online activism where I feel like if I've expressed an opinion on Instagram, I've really made a difference in the world.

Richard Rohr: I've walked the protest line.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And it's not the same. When I think about your dynamic unity, I think about how the message of the universal Christ tells me that it's all going to be okay and inspires me to love everyone, but the message of Jesus reminds me that I have to do my part-

Paul Swanson: Right.

Mike Petrow: And I have work to do.

Richard Rohr: Very good.

Mike Petrow: ... To make that more real in the world.

Richard Rohr: That's great.

Mike Petrow: And if I lose either one for the other, I'm in trouble.

Richard Rohr: [inaudible 00:30:11].

Mike Petrow: If I lose the universal Christ, I'm one person lighting a candle against the darkness, but if I lose the Jesus, then I don't do anything.

Paul Swanson: That's it.

Richard Rohr: We need the concrete and we need the universal for healthy religion. And to fly too far in one direction or the other is not very healing, it's not very holy. And they're the same meaning. The holy is always healing, and it's the same word as salvation, solace.

Mike Petrow: Wow. So if I were to bring us to a close, I think about, here we are in Advent talking about the joy of Christmas and Christ and moving the joyful anticipation. Also, shining a light in a dark time, the darkest time of the year for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere. The world is not necessarily in a great state. There's a lot of people who are alarmed and concerned, with good reason, for things going on in the world. There's a lot of people, at least I'm guessing a good portion of our listeners are not anticipating moving into January.

And yet, we have the promise of Christ and the teaching of Jesus to tell us to do our part, to make the world a more loving place. Jesus, having his ministry when the Roman Empire, had its boot on the neck of his people and his culture.

Richard, what hope would you give our listeners for finding their own way to shine a light in dark times, and also not lose hope when everything in the world looks bleak? And I'm not sure that everything in the world looks bleak, but there's definitely some things to be concerned about.

Paul Swanson: There's a lot going on.

Richard Rohr: If one reads history at all, you can say without exaggeration, it's always been this way. We in America just grew up in a bubble, starting in the 1950s, that we were the exception. We never had wars on our shores.

Mike Petrow: Those of us who were right color in the right class-

Richard Rohr: Yeah, of course.

Mike Petrow: ... To tap into the privilege of that.

Paul Swanson: Right.

Mike Petrow: The right gender and everything.

Richard Rohr: We grew up with a huge amount of order that most people have never experienced. I once watched, was it a six part series on the history of China? It just makes you want to... The tears of things makes you want to cry. Just barbaric massacrism and starting over again and starting over again and starting over again. What is God doing with all that?

I am so glad I wrote the book *The Tears of Things* at this time because it seems to be our only recourse for some kind of sanity, is we know it deserves weeping, which is not to consent to it or assent to it, but neither is it to directly oppose it because oppositional energy only creates more of the same. It's always been this way. What made us think it shouldn't be for us, that we were above this, we were America, we were the white ruling class, of course, of the world as we thought. We had a little too much security and order and wealth. We didn't have to participate in what has never stopped in Africa and Europe, in Asia.

Mike Petrow: Sure. It happened here and we chose not to see it.

Richard Rohr: And it did. Well, thank you for saying that. I mean, read the history of the Civil War. My God. Talk about massacres. And then the medicine, the unavailable medicine, the horrors of hospitals during the Civil War. We grew up with the comfort of hospitals. As you know, I've had five cancers, unrelated, and I've been healed of all five of them, seemingly by the miracle of modern medicine. So after a while, you just, "Well, what's going to be the sixth?"

Mike Petrow: Bring it on.

Richard Rohr: "How will I be healed of this one?"

Mike Petrow: My goodness.

Richard Rohr: Success has just come too easily to us. And you were a parent, Paul. You wouldn't be a good parent if you didn't want to bring that success to your two little angels.

Paul Swanson: But you're pointing to it too, is living in empire with the false security of order and wealth.

Richard Rohr: There. That's what I'm saying.

Paul Swanson: And privilege, particularly as privilege as white-bodied people. That's one thing, that real transformation can happen anywhere, but I feel like those are also barriers to the fullness of who a person can be when life is so comfortable.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: You only try to create more comfort, rather than the radicality of the gospel.

Richard Rohr: We don't need salvation. We've got it most days of our life. We got it.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. And I know we're out of time and we need to end, but I know one of the paradoxes of the holidays is it can draw us back to a nostalgia and let us be thankful for nostalgia, for good times. Those of us. And I think we've all experienced good times somewhere, but in our safest and most secure times, we're not often aware of our neighbor who's suffering or who is outcast and ostracized and persecuted by the dominant culture. So I appreciate that reminder.

Richard Rohr: I do think one of the main spiritual purposes of suffering is to create solidarity. Solidarity with those who have no choice in the matter.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: And we have a bit of choice. And to say yes to that is to be in solidarity with Sudan and Gaza and Ukraine.

Well, you bring such interesting ideas out of me. Thank you. Thank you.

Paul Swanson: Yeah. To hold the importance and gravitas of the suffering and solidarity, we also can't negate the joy of Christmas either, the joy of this season, how both are true at once. And this feels like another unity, dynamic unity we have to live inside of.

Richard Rohr: They coexist. And maybe they coexist because of one another. I think so.

Mike Petrow: May it be so that we find joy in the midst of suffering.

Paul Swanson: Amen.

Mike Petrow: And in our joy, remember those who are suffering.

Paul Swanson: Thank you, Richard.

Richard Rohr: Well, it's great to talk to men of the gospel.

Mike Petrow: Right on. Richard, would you like to wish our listeners a happy Advent and a Merry Christmas? Give them a Christmas question.

Richard Rohr: Christmas too?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Mike Petrow: They'll get this in time.

Paul Swanson: It's the last they'll hear from us until the new year.

Richard Rohr: Okay.

Mike Petrow: And give them a Christmas blessing.

Richard Rohr: Well, blessed, humble listeners, I am in awe of your trust that you would think we'd have something to say that might help you. I hope it does. I hope it helps this suffering world, and your world, and leads us beyond the tears of things. Well, tears themselves are a bivalent thing. There really are tears of happiness. So let's shed both tears this Advent and this Christmas. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: Amen and amen.

Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Drew Jackson, Paul Swanson, happy Advent, merry Christmas. It is so good to be here with the two of you today.

Paul Swanson: Ditto, great to be here with you. Happy Advent as well to both.

Drew Jackson: Yeah. So good to be here with you both.

Mike Petrow: Right on. We've just come back from a great conversation with Richard, and this is a bonus episode for our listeners. We are taking a moment to ump ahead. And as we continue to work our way through Eager to Love, we're looking at one of the appendices today and we're dropping this special episode just as an Advent and a Christmas episode as we find ourselves right at the top of the holidays. And we're so thrilled to get to do this.

Drew and Paul, I have to ask each of you, do you celebrate Advent as something different or leading up to Christmas, and if so, do you have any favorite Advent traditions?

Paul Swanson: Drew, you want to go first or you want to go second?

Drew Jackson: Go ahead.

Paul Swanson: Well, I love Advent. And my uptick in church participation is noticeable during Advent because I get there a little bit earlier. I feel like I stay a little bit longer. There's... Even the structure of which hymns are sung and how long, I don't know if any communities you've all have been a part of. I know we've talked about this song before, but now I'm blanking on the title. But each week we add a verse.

Come All ye Faithful. Each week we add a verse as we get closer to Christmas. And it pains me to wait to add a second verse in that because I think it's such a beautiful song. So I think

my church participation increases. We have Advent calendars for the kids, and then we have advent wreath. My youngest has just started taking a little piece of the Christmas tree in their lunch every day as a way to remind them that Christmas is coming.

So yeah, there's a whole slew of things. And then of course, Christmas movies and things like that just to build up that anticipation. How about you, Drew? What comes to mind for you?

Drew Jackson: Well, if you were to talk to my family, they would tell you about how much of a Christmas Advent junkie I am. I just love this season. And my daughter, Suhaila, she makes fun of me for this, but I'm the November 1st, let's get into it as soon as we can. But I love Advent in particular for that sense of longing and anticipation and the way to re-tap into that sense of what are my deepest longings, what am I longing for? My favorite Advent hymn is, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Mike Petrow: Yes.

Drew Jackson: I play it over and over and over again. To me, it just captures the essence of the season. It takes me right into the heart of it, both the melody of it, the tone of it, and also the lyrics. So one of my traditions is to just sit with that song again.

But another thing I've started to do is as a personal practice during this season, has been to just reflect on what is it that I'm being invited to let go of in a fresh way, and in order to make room for whatever new thing wants to emerge. I really feel like that has become a core advent practice for me, and it's connected to this part of the advent season that is about making room, making room for whatever it is that is going to arrive or show up. But there's a decluttering, a letting go that has to happen. So that's been a part of a practice for me that I really engage in during this season.

Mike Petrow: I love that so much. I have a neurotic love of Dickens Christmas Carol, which was not... It was forced on me. My dad used to collect different versions of the movie, and it was something I begrudgingly indulged in. And then one day, it just became an absolute true and pure love of mine. And so now I do the same thing. I watch all different versions of the movies, but I actually have an entire advent reflection practice that I go through. In the story, you Ebenezer Scrooge haunted by a ghost, who then tells him that he's going to be visited by three more spirits. And there's a ghost of Christmas, past, present, future, which elicits a transformation in him.

And so, I spend the first week of Advent always asking myself what has been haunting me from the year before? What's been keeping me up? What's been giving me anxiety and fear? I spend the next week thinking about what from the past and who from the past wants to be heard and how that needs to be honored in shaping my journey. I have a lot of rituals that week and bring in ancestors and mentors and recently departed loved ones, and try to listen to their wisdom. And then in the third week, or extending to Christmas, I ask myself what in the present I need to pay better attention to? What moments of joy, what opportunities for love am I not seeing that I need to see a little more clearly? And then in the week between Christmas and New Year's, I ask myself about the future and where it's all going. And I rewrite my personal mission statement every year, but I love the upfront lead into that.



Drew, you said so many good things. I have to tell you, I share your love of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. I have a playlist that is just 10 different versions of that song, and I will literally just sit exactly, sit with that song because I love the notion of waiting for Christ to come, ransom captive Israel. At the darkest time of the year for those of us who live in the Northern Hemisphere, when the light is the least between sunrise and sunset, that sort of longing for, fill in the blank, all the things that we're longing for. I love how you said that Drew, and the decluttering, when it's cold outside and we have to be inside a little more and slow down.

So it's such a great way. You've given us such a good lead in, Drew. I'd invite you to say a little more, if you're willing, and Paul also, what does Advent really, really mean to you spiritually and at a deep soul level?

Drew Jackson: Yeah. I mean, it is that reconnecting with our deepest longings, for me, is really at the heart of the Advent season. I love the story in the Gospels of Simeon and just the way that his story encapsulates he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. I think there's... One translation says it that way, that he's this elder who's been waiting and waiting and waiting and just embodies the corporate collective waiting of the whole community for God's liberation, God's salvation, God's justice to break through. And to me, he's such an embodiment of the Advent season is about.

And so, I love just the invitation to reconnect with that sense of longing, for love, for shalom, for justice to really emerge in our world.

Mike Petrow: That's so good. Drew, have you ever heard, Henri Nouwen does a talk on the spirituality of waiting, and it's his classic Advent. It's one of my favorite things. So rich-

Drew Jackson: So good.

Mike Petrow: The Enneagram four in me just loves, in some ways, I like the waiting more than the actual consummation than the encounter, which I have to be careful about. But again, that deep, deep soul desire to be met in love and to see, not to get too nerdy, but the apocytostasis, the restoration, the justice and love for all things and all people. Goodness gracious. I love that.

Paul, what about you?

Paul Swanson: Well, I got to make a correction on my first response because I'm notoriously bad with song titles. So the hymn I was trying to remember, it was not Come All Ye Faithful, but O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Paul Swanson: That is the one where each Sunday we add another verse. So I just want to pile on onto the party and appreciation of that particular song.

And Mike, I want to get a link to that playlist-

Mike Petrow: We'll share it with you, for sure.

Paul Swanson: All the varieties out there. Thinking about Advent and just the experience of Mary being pregnant, and then the experience of being alongside my wife through two pregnancies and just that very embodied anticipation of what is not here, what will soon be here. And the preparations that go on, it's a very visceral feeling that I get since I've had kids during this season of waiting with a different type of anticipation that feels like it can only happen in this darkness of winter. It feels like an enveloping darkness that is safe and warm and carrying through. And I think I lost that for a period from childhood to adulthood.

In our family, we talk about adult dark and kid dark, how there's a time when you're outside where the adults will say, "Well, it's too dark, let's go inside." And the kids are like, "No, it's good. We're fine." Their capacity to hold and play in the darkness seems longer than mine as an adult. And I feel like connecting that to the waiting period, the anticipation of pregnancy, of what gets formed in that way, waiting for new life, I find that has been an extraordinary incarnational reminder to look at creation around me and the seasonality of it all, to be patient with what reality is bringing into the world. And this particular liturgical season to be patient with the coming Christ

Mike Petrow: This is so good. It's funny, we're at a very particular moment in time. The world is on fire in a lot of ways. People are suffering and dying all around the globe, and in our own backyards, in a lot of instances. There's a lot of folks who are very, very nervous as we move through the holidays towards January and the coming years, of what it's going to bring.

And I've been hearing this phrase, and it's not new, but a lot of people wondering, are we currently in the darkness of the womb or the darkness of the tomb at this moment in human history where we find ourselves? And I'd like to talk about that in a second, but in listening to you talk, Paul, about this sort of anticipation that comes in leading towards birth through pregnancy, and thinking about the darkness of the womb, the darkness of the tomb, Drew, I can't help but think of this amazing collection of poetry that you've penned. And I get the title wrong sometimes. Is it *God Speaks Through Wombs*?

Drew Jackson: *God Speaks Through Wombs*.

Mike Petrow: Heck, yeah. Can you, first of all, tell us a little bit about compiling all this beautiful poetry? And then in a second, I want to ask you about how you think it might hit us, particularly in the Advent season, but where did all this come from for you?

Drew Jackson: Yeah, so this collection of poetry is, they're poems that are in conversation with the first eight chapters of the Gospel of Luke. And it's not meant to be a commentary on Luke, but there were a couple of different things that I was thinking about as I was writing through this collection. One of them was, there's a tradition, a rabbinic tradition that talks about how the Psalter, the five books of the Psalter, the Psalms, are in conversation with the five books of Torah. And that they're not commentaries on them, but the songs and the poetry of the Psalms arose out of this reflection on and sitting with the stories told throughout Torah.

So if you think about, say, book two of the Psalter, that talks about, and has Psalms that are talking about as the deer thirst flowing streams, so my soul thirsts for you, and talks about being in a dry and weary land where there is no water. But then you read that with backdrop of the Exodus, it takes on a different meaning than just a person like my own

personal desert. But then you're like, "Oh, this is also commentary on a collective longing for liberation and this journey of freedom and all of those things that the Exodus story is telling, is talking about."

And so I had this thought, I was like, "I wonder what poetry would sound like and feel like today if it rose out of conversation with the gospels." So it first started as just this experiment, what would this feel like and what would this sound like? But then secondly for me, I was drawn to the Gospel of Luke in particular because of Luke's emphasis on his centering of the voices of the marginalized in the way that he's telling the narrative. So he is very intentionally centering the voices of women in his narrative, very intentionally centering the voices of the poor in the way that he's telling this gospel narrative.

And for me personally, I started to write this collection during lockdown 2020, everything going on from COVID, but also just the revelation in a new way of the deep racial sickness that exists in our country. And so personally, as a Black man navigating that, I was just in conversation myself with all of those things and felt like the characters in Luke's gospel became conversation partners for me of those who had an understanding of history from its underside. And I could talk to, in a way, where I wasn't having to explain myself or wasn't having to prove that what I and those who I know had experienced navigating the landscape of American empire. I didn't have to explain that to them and prove that that actually happened. We could just talk. So these poems emerged out of that place. Yeah.

Mike Petrow: Oh my God, that's so rich. That's so rich. And they're such, such beautiful poems.

Drew Jackson: Thank you.

Mike Petrow: Did that writing... So we're sitting here in Advent, did that writing change the way that you experienced this?

Drew Jackson: Absolutely. I mean, on a very surface level, those first few chapters are sitting in Advent Christmas narrative. So I'm engaging directly with that story. But I think, to connect it to just that deep sense of longing that we've been talking about that is so central to the Advent season and the way that light is breaking into the darkness. That theme of Advent, you can't talk about light breaking in unless you get real about the darkness that's present. We've got to talk about it. We've got to be intimately in touch with it.

And there's that passage of scripture in the gospels, I think Matthew is quoting Isaiah, is quoting one of the prophets. And he says, "To those who have been waiting in darkness, on them the light has shown." And there's something about the light coming to those who have been sitting in the darkness. And so, the title poem from this collection starts by saying, "In the days of empires and puppet regimes, God speaks." And so, even that to look at this Advent narrative against... To take the actual context of what the Christ is birthed into of this Roman Empire and occupation, the people suffering under that, all that's happening around that, that is when this particular moment in time happens, this in breaking of the Christ into this particular point in history happens, that's significant. And it connects to our stories and the stories of those who have been particularly oppressed and marginalized, who have been waiting and longing for justice, for shalom, for centuries. And to say, that is, to me, what does it mean to move toward that? That's what this season invites us into.

Mike Petrow: That's so powerful. I think about Howard Thurman's famous question, "What does the religion have to say to people?" What does the religion of Jesus have to say to people with their backs against the wall? And I don't think it's any small coincidence.

When I think about the Christian contemplative tradition, it has shined the brightest in moments of darkness. And amongst the disenfranchised and the marginalized, it seems to be the people with the boot of empire against their neck who somehow shine the brightest light and bring the greatest revelations of love to the forefront, which is wild to think about. And not a way that a lot of us experience mainstream Christianity today.

Drew Jackson: No. No.

Paul Swanson: Drew, can we hear a poem, a poem that reflects this sentiment of what you're sharing through how you prepared for that collection and maybe what's speaking to you? If there's a poem that's been encircling your mind during these Advent days. It's hard to talk about poetry and then not want to hear one. So I would love to invite you, getting into your poem, This Darkness is fantastic, but if there's another one that is more ripe for you or top of mind, I'd love to hear it.

Drew Jackson: I would love to share a poem. And my poem, This Darkness is a poem that I wrote. It's actually not a part of the collection. I just wrote it personally as a reflection only Advent season. And it's funny, because it's a very short poem that simply says, not all darkness is the darkness of despair. This may be the darkness of the womb that is consuming you, inviting you to wait there for the fullness of time. And this poem connects so much to one of the things that I read in Dr. B's Race and the Cosmos.

Mike Petrow: Right on.

Drew Jackson: Where she says, "In the beginning there is darkness. It is the womb out of which we are born. In this state of trusting refuge, the light of divine revelation, which pierces but does not castigate the darkness, may finally be seen. This is a mothering darkness that nurses its offspring." So good.

Mike Petrow: So good. So good.

Drew and Paul, what... First of all, thank you, Drew. Wow. I just... Would you give us that poem again, Drew?

Drew Jackson: Absolutely. This Darkness. "Not all darkness is the darkness of despair. This may be the darkness of the womb that is consuming you, inviting you to wait there for the fullness of time."

Mike Petrow: That's so good. I have to ask the two of you what... And we'll talk about Christmas in a second, but what advice as a friend to a friend would you give to our listeners who are struggling to sit in the darkness and think of it as a mothering darkness or wait to see what it has for them, especially at this moment in time and the moment that we find ourselves in?

Drew Jackson: I think it's just worth saying that this idea of the darkness is not... We don't want to sentimentalize it. It's real. And the pain of sitting and waiting in the darkness is real. This

place of hurt, loss, disappointment, unknowing.

And so, I think I would first say that just to be honest about naming the actual pain of sitting in the darkness is a necessary part of it that we learn to name it. I think only when we can begin to name the reality of the darkness and begin to not try to sidestep it or not try to just move too quickly to, but the light's coming. There's something about coming to experience the presence of God in the darkness that itself is part of our transformation.

You can't... It's Psalm 23. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, that's darkness. I fear no evil because you are with me. There's a witness that we can come to experience in the darkness that is. We can't know when everything is fine. And so, I think there's something invitational about that that I've personally have experienced just in this journey of the darkness of grief. And after having lost my mother to cancer and sitting in that darkness of that that is like... Mike, you know just how that feels. And even years out, you're still in that darkness and that waiting for like, "Okay, what's the light that's breaking in here?" But there is a witness that, at least to speak for myself, I've experienced it. I've tasted it, and I mean, it's good.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. I appreciate that. It is something to... I can't help but think of Jim Finley, one of our teachers. What is his famous saying that everyone loves? Mirror by Star refers to it as the quote that we all put in our books, when he says, "If we're absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing but sustains us in all things, then we can touch the hurting places in ourselves and others with love." But that sustaining in all things is a long, slow, painful process. I appreciate that, Drew.

And thinking about the darkness in the womb and the darkness of the tomb, I haven't thought about this in a hot minute, but yeah, I know that feeling sitting next to my mom as she was slowly dying from cancer, and just being with her every day in that waiting. And when I had that experience, my brother had passed a few months before that. And his daughter was born while my mother was dying in the hospital. So I held the hand of my dying mother and my newborn niece in the same day. You talk about the darkness of the womb and the darkness of the tomb intertwining. And that was such a breakthrough moment for me. I think it was a legitimately mystical moment. It changed my experience of what reality is because I think we're always living in the womb and the tomb at the same time. And thanks for that reminder, Drew. Thanks for that reminder.

Paul Swanson: I don't have anything as profound as what's just been shared, but I did have the image of that mothering darkness of wilderness, like when you're in the wilderness at night and you can't see anything, and yet, everything is operating as it should be. And then if there's a moon, there's... I just had the image of the full moon, but also if it's cloudy, it gets covered up. But then when the clouds pass, there's almost like a flash of light as a reminder that everything is as it should be as it is seen. And then as the clouds cover it again, you're back in the darkness. And you know that morning will come.

But I also feel like in wilderness, in the darkness of wilderness, it's so much longer. Time drops into the taste of eternity and time no longer makes sense. And it's only the rhythm of light and darkness that will in break on one another. But yet, within that darkness, you get these flashes of the moon reflecting the light. And that image of just not always knowing

when one is going to end break on the other.

Mike Petrow: Make me think of sleeping outside in a sleeping bag that's too thin, just counting the seconds and the minutes and the hours for the sun to come back up.

Drew Jackson: There's one other image that emerges for me, and thinking about sitting and waiting in the darkness and what that experience is like. And I keep coming back to the image that is right at the beginning in the creation narrative of this whole picture being painted of just darkness and chaos and the spirit hovering over it. Just the old King James version uses the language of the spirit hovering over the darkness, brooding over the darkness, but that darkness also being the word chaos, hovering over the chaos. And we don't think we feel that, even the way that sitting in the darkness at times feels like chaos. It feels like we don't know what this is, but there's something about that, the darkness that ends up being a creative energy for... It's creative.

And when I step back and I think about even collectively some of the things that we're going through and just the ways that we are grappling with the seeming collapse of empire, I think about how, you think through history and you think through those movements of justice that emerge, they always emerge during times of seeming darkness and chaos, is because people are forced to think creatively about something beyond the status quo, something beyond just what is. And so, it's in the darkness where we're saying, but what could be. And so, people start to scheme and conspire and reimagine what could be in the darkness. And that is actually what begins to make way for the new thing, it's that reimagining happens in the darkness. So that's another thing for me that resonates when I think about sitting in the darkness of Advent.

Mike Petrow: I note that we didn't talk about the chapter at all, but this was too good to interrupt. If folks wanted to read along and they didn't know this was coming, so they probably didn't with the appendix in the book, it was a dynamic unity between Jesus and Christ.

Ten second lightning round question, how do Jesus and Christ show up in your Christmas? And then we'll wrap it up. And I will tell you, I said this when we talked to Richard, I'm finding more and more that it is the Christ that reminds me that love has the final say on reality. And it is Jesus who reminds me that I have to work to make that happen. And I see that both in my Christmas and my Advent. And so I appreciate the invitation to pay a little more attention to where I can show love to everyone around me.

Drew Jackson: I'm going to take your formula, Mike, and say that it's the Christ that reminds me that God is always looking to be born into the world, that that's always happening, all the time. And it's Jesus that reminds me that the divine wants to be born in me, in this particular flesh, and in these flesh and bones, today, tomorrow, and the next day.

Mike Petrow: Right on.

Paul Swanson: I'm going back to what I had shared earlier about the way that the church I'm a part of where we sing Come, O Come, Emmanuel one verse at a time, Where the fullness of the song is there, but we only get to participate in it through bits and pieces until we get to that fullness. And that pattern reminds me of how the birth of the world and the soul, the overflowing and connection to Jesus in my life is the connection to the full song that's always

present but hasn't been fully sung yet. So that's where my mind's going right now.

Mike Petrow: Oh, my gosh. That's so good. Gentlemen, this has been a fantastic conversation. Drew is the newest member of our little conversation group here. I'm going to put you on the spot if you don't mind, and I'm going to ask you if you wouldn't give us that poem one more time and then send us out with a Christmas benediction for all our listeners.

While you take a moment to tee up for that, I'll just remind everyone, folks, we're taking a break for the holidays. We'll be back with you with our next chapter on the other side of the holidays. Thanks so much for listening.

Drew, I'll give it to you to close us out.

Drew Jackson: This Darkness. Not all darkness is the darkness of despair. This may be the darkness of the womb that is consuming you, inviting you to wait there for the fullness of time. And as you head into this season, I'm going to send you with these words of benediction and blessing: let it be love that forms in me. Spirit dressed in flesh and bone. Let me hold still long enough to hear its heartbeat, to feel its faint movements. Let love find food in this home of my body, nourishment for its earthen journey. Let this be my labor, to be a safe place for love to grow. Amen.

Corey Wayne: Thanks for listening to this podcast by the Center for Action and Contemplation, an educational nonprofit that introduces seekers to the contemplative Christian path of transformation.

To learn more about our work, visit us at [cac.org](http://cac.org). Everything Belongs is made possible thanks to the generosity of our supporters and the shared work of-

Mike Petrow: Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: Paul Swanson.

Drew Jackson: Drew Jackson.

Jenna Keiper: Jenna Kuyper.

Izzy Spitz: Izzy Spitz.

Megan Hare: Megan Hare.

Sarah Palmer: Sarah Palmer.

Dorothy Abraham...: Dorothy Abrams.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

Corey Wayne: And me, Corey Wayne. The music you hear is composed and provided by our friends, Hammock. And we'd also like to thank Sound on Studios for all of their work in post-production. From the high desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good.