

## The essence of Advent

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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It's an odd year for my family. My parents, 88 and 89, have lived rich and full lives, and my husband, children and I have shared holidays large and small with them.

But this year they are confined to rooms in a nursing home. I realize with a lump in my throat that they won't be coming to my house for Christmas: Dad doesn't have the energy, and Mom would be enervated from the confusion. And this year, for that matter, we don't need to call right on Christmas Day as they won't know, or at least not for long, that it's Christmas. Yes, we could buy Mom a new cardigan, but she'll abandon it early on in favor of her favorite faded coral one.

We won't attend worship together, although this has been the center of their lives and holidays all these years. I find myself reluctant to even pull out Christmas decorations. Why invite a flush of memories when even the present moment is being pulled out from under me?

Then I remember that a bright piece of wrapping paper with almost anything inside makes my mom's eyes light up in the very essence of delight: that will represent the symbolism of giving for all of us. My dad may rouse himself for a bite of a pie if there's whipped cream: that will be our Christmas feast. We will hold hands and share a prayer, which will chase the loose ends of confusion, longing and grief away and invite God to put us together again and to make our setting holy, even if we are in a spare, crowded bedroom with a view, my son noted, of whoever's in the shower across the hall. And we may sing the choruses of favorite carols, with both my parents joining in and forgetting problematic life on earth for the sweetness of something that's coming to us, and to all who call out for it.

I'll decorate the tree tomorrow.