

The radiance when God comes close

By [Lydia Bailey](#)

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I saw it in the rearview mirror while headed to serve as a deacon at the 5 p.m. Christmas Eve service last year.

The full moon was rising over a hill, light spilling into the atmosphere, though the sky was still bright. Was it the moon's enormity, or its silence? Something was changing. The houses began to look tiny. The din of humankind was but one part of this larger landscape presided over by the moon—the ducks on the pond already knew this. Stillness was setting in.

Unexpectedly, I sensed something, a quality to things we passed. The [words of Abraham Heschel](#) clicked: "Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme." Perhaps I was primed for this on Christmas Eve, when Christians are tuned to the mystery of God not as an abstract concept but as a babe in a manger within the ordinary, earthy, created world.

At church we had incense and candles pointing to an experience larger than words, symbols, or creeds can contain. God was coming close.

Inside the church, lights were darkened, making me only more aware of what was happening outside. Far to the west, a wall of clouds was approaching, the last light of day streaking from behind. Here was this quality again that I could not name in this church and outside: things not only are what they are but also stand for *something*.

Driving home, the moon was squarely over the road ahead. At a traffic light a man leaned out his driver's window to snap a picture of the moon on his phone. Later, I noticed that people all over Ohio were posting photos of the moon on Facebook. There was a hint of the comical to this moon portrayed beside houses, like some friendly giant visiting for the holidays. But it couldn't be contained.

The moonlight highlighted seemingly mundane scenes along the route home. A nearby spruce tree was now a statue of frost. The lonely gas station with an empty lot beyond had a sense of the beautiful. Moonlight was running along telephone lines, sweeping the aluminum siding of houses. Rather than being dissolved in this light, all these things were radiant in their individual ways.

Is this not what Advent is about? God is coming to reside in the intimate particularity of our everyday lives.

Standing on the porch at home, my mind went to other settings: the bitter lot of Syrian refugees—they were under this moon. I thought of those at the homeless shelter in Cleveland where I work, having one last cigarette outside before lights off. Moonlight was touching their foreheads in a tender way. Beyond them were empty warehouses, the moon defining the scarred rooftops of the city before reaching the expanse of Lake Erie and shining brilliantly on waves.

My entire family went back for the 11 p.m. service. We were a tiny cluster leaving the church, walking to our car and driving home with moonlight enveloping us. After everyone had gone to bed, I stood out in the backyard. No wind, not a sound—except something like the sound of the ground absorbing moisture. This was not an empty silence but the quiet being of rocks, ferns, moss, the roots of trees.

Now the moon was very high and small. The cloudbank I'd seen earlier was almost upon us. At a still higher level, a second layer of clouds was advancing like rivers in the sky. Far below, there I stood with the smell of incense on my clothes and in my hair.

Standing on the grass, I noticed a new sound. When had it arrived? So fine, like a tapping on the dry oak leaves around me. A moment later it entered the woods beyond, sighing in and out of the branches. The smallest drops of rain had begun, now touching my nose.

It was Christmas, ushered in by the slightest *ssshhhhh* of rain, the moon all but smudged out. In a few hours it would be dawn with a steel-gray sky.

*This post was edited on December 2.*