When my family decorates for Christmas, the best box that comes out of storage is also the heaviest one: the Christmas books. Opening the lid each year is like reuniting with dear friends.

Picture books combine art and story to share big ideas in simple words, drawing us into the spirit of the season. This Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, why not share a picture book with your loved ones—or with children and adults at your church? You might start with one of these favorites:

**Refuge** (by Anne Booth and Sam Usher, Little Brown, 2015) picks up the nativity story where many retellings stop: as the Holy Family flees to Egypt for safety. The parallels to contemporary immigration stories are clear; a portion of the proceeds from book sales supports the UN High Commission on Refugees.

**A Small Miracle** (by Peter Collington, Dragonfly Books, 1997) is a story told in pictures, without words. When a poor, elderly woman collapses in the snow, help comes from an unexpected source: the figures in a nativity set! I love the illustration of Mary tenderly holding the woman’s hand … and of the Magi pawning their frankincense to purchase her Christmas dinner.

**The Miracle of Saint Nicholas** (by Gloria Whelan, illustrated by Judith Brown, Bethlehem Books, 1997) takes place in a Russian village just after the fall of Communism, as the community prepares for its first Christmas in decades. Where will they find the candles, the bread and wine, the icon, the priest? It’s a surprising story about the tenacity of faith and community in times of persecution.

**The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey** (by Susan Wojciechowski, illustrated by P.J. Lynch, Candlewick Press, 1995) tells the story of gruff and grieving woodcarver who rediscovers hope and joy as he crafts a nativity set for a curious boy. If your Christmas is blue, this is a good place to start.

**The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree** (by Gloria Houston, illustrated by Barbara Cooney, Dial, 1988). In the mountains of North Carolina at the end of the First World War, Ruthie’s family take their turn providing a Christmas tree for the Pine Grove church. As a girl, I loved the way Ruthie’s dreams come true; as a parent, I love the way her mother sacrificially makes them happen. (My husband can’t read this one aloud without crying, so our Christmas tradition, of course, is to insist that he do so.)

**Humphrey's First Christmas** (by Carol Heyer, Ideals, 2007) has some of the funniest illustrations ever, perfectly depicting a silly camel with a very high opinion of himself. It’s a fun Epiphany read-aloud, as Humphrey’s attention slowly turns from his own petty complaints to the awe of serving a newborn king.

**The Story of Holly and Ivy** (by Rumer Godden 1957, illustrated by Barbara Cooney 1985, Viking). If I had to call one of these books my favorite, it would be this one: the story of a doll unpurchased on a toy shop shelf and an orphaned girl scheduled to spend Christmas alone. On the surface, this story is entirely secular—but the magical way Holly and Ivy find one another speaks to a hidden Power, working for good in all things.

As we welcome the Word made flesh, let’s celebrate his story with words and pictures. Merry Christmas, friends.

Your sister in Christ,

Liddy

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