



Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season

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The Christmas season is a particularly difficult time for women to slow down and relish what's right in front of them. An annual marker for many, it is a holiday that can often remind us how life is not going as we'd planned. Our family relationships remain strained, our finances stretched, and our schedules stuffed with too much to do in too little time.

Following the formula of her successful *Loving My Actual Life*, Alexandra Kuykendall shares with readers her own personal experiment to be completely present in her life *as it is* during the holiday season.

Addressing the themes of Advent and Christmas, she reflects on hope, love, joy, peace, and relishing the season, with practical pullouts on common Christmas stressors, such as finances, schedules, and extended family. Kuykendall's signature candor helps women go easy on themselves, remember what truly matters, and find joy in their imperfect Christmases.

Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season Details

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From Reader Review Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season for online ebook

Jen Bradbury says

Christmas has always stressed me out. That stress has only worsened since I became a mom.

For that reason, I was intrigued by Alexandra Kuykendall's *Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season*. In this book, Alexandra sets out to conduct an experiment in how she can be more present during her actual life in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Each week, Alexandra identifies a need (following the themes of Advent: Hope, Love, Joy, Peace as well as Christmastide), and then implements an experiment "of capturing the essence of the season". She then writes daily journal entries about the process before summarizing what she's learned and reflecting on what practices she'll keep after her official experiment is over in a format reminiscent of Jen Hatmaker's *Seven*.

Overall, I enjoyed *Loving My Actual Christmas*. In particular, I enjoyed learning about Alexandra's experiments and wrestling with how I might adjust them for my own context. I also found Alexandra's reflections to be good reminders, especially during a season in which my daughter is still so little. As Alexandra reminds her readers, "This is a Christmas I won't get back."

Throughout *Loving My Actual Christmas*, I also appreciated Alexandra's willingness to let her readers peak inside her family's traditions. One of my favorites was seeing how she allows each girl in her family a chance to shop for the others in their family. I love this idea so much that I'm hoping to incorporate it with my own daughter so that even this Christmas, there will be stuff under the tree that she chose for each person.

One of my favorite sections of *Loving My Actual Christmas* is the chapter on hope. I especially appreciated how Alexandra distinguishes between expectations and hope. According to her, "When I expect something I'm nearly certain it will arrive. When I hope for something, there is less surety... Perhaps expectations are how we want things to go down (great Christmas orchestrators that we are) and hopes are the desired lasting effects for relationships, memories, and growth."

Within the chapter on hope, Alexandra also talks about how we need the Christmas story. In her words, "There is a reason we remember this story every year: because we need to. We need the reminder that pushing onward when plans change is sometimes the only way to move forward. Believing that there is a different ending from what is in front of us is hope."

Another thing I really appreciated about *Loving My Actual Christmas* is that Alexandra includes a section in it on Christmastide. Tired people (especially moms) will find this chapter particularly helpful in finding rest. In it, Alexandra challenges herself (and her readers), "What if I used these twelve days for Christmastide's intended purpose? To celebrate God's birth as a baby over an extended period of time?... What if I gave baby Jesus the kind of attention his birth deserves instead of moving directly on to the next holiday?"

What if we all did? Perhaps then we'd actually be able to enjoy Christmas, time with families, and the celebration of Jesus' birth without it becoming just another stressor on our calendars.

Without a doubt, Alexandra's *Loving My Actual Christmas* will challenge and help haggard moms to do this, to "notice the goodness God has offered in the here and now" rather than "overspending, overeating, undersleeping, and underrejoicing." What's more, its short size means busy moms will realistically be able to

find time in their schedules to read it – either before Advent begins in order to plan for a less stressful Christmas season OR during Advent as a devotional.

Disclosure: I received a free copy of Loving My Actual Christmas from Baker Books in exchange for a fair and honest review.

Anne Rogers says

"I am assuming we are alike in that yours is not a holiday filled with perfect gifts, impeccable decorations, and seamless relationships. That it is filled with constraints on time and money, and flawed people... And you want to enjoy this Christmas. The one right in front of you. This will be about relishing what is in your life. Your family. Your budget. Your reality."

The Christmas of 2016 was a tough one for mum of four Alexandra Kuykendall to determine to relish the season. Her father died just a few months before Christmas, so this book – which is very autobiographical as the intention to love her actual Christmas is laid out in its pages as an experiment in how to do it – touches often on planning for and celebrating Christmas while at the same time grieving.

The book is split into sections including the weeks of Advent, Christmas itself – even referring to Boxing Day which is uncommon in American books – and a section of very practical tips and suggestions of the down-to-earth kind. Including, usefully, 'The Power of No Thank You', some realistic and helpful comments on finances, and a particularly nice section headed 'Stewarding the Story: Kids and the Christmas Story'.

Advent week 3 is titled 'Joy' and faces head on the challenge of this when you are not feeling very joyful. Alexandra writes: "Jesus continues, "Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." (John 16:20). If ever there was a message of hope for the lonely and the brokenhearted this Christmas, it's this. While the rest of the world seems to be throwing a party that we can't embrace or get behind because of the hurt of our life, Jesus promises it won't always be so."

I would have no hesitation in recommending this book to anyone who is struggling with loss this Christmas. It's a book which is very open about the huge impact of grief, at one point describing the author weeping at the supermarket as she tries to decide whether buying her mother the box of chocolates her father always used to give her for Christmas will comfort or upset her. Yet it's not a sad book.

The whole 'intentionality' of what Alexandra does means that hope, love, peace, and joy are a part of her Christmas, despite a few hiccups along the way. Her father, though absent, is clearly a very central figure on Christmas Day. "We had oranges as part of our menu in honour of Grandpa's Christmas orange and talked about him and missed him terribly. And we thanked God for the fullness of life right here and now and for a man with a life well lived. It was a hard day. A good day. An actual Christmas Day right smack-dab in the middle of our actual lives."

For those who are simply faced with the usual huge to-do list and sense of being overwhelmed, who feel they've lost the magic of Christmas and want some of that magic back, I would definitely recommend this book. We might be close to the big day now, but there is still time to help you to love your own actual Christmas, rather than secretly long for it all to be over.

Peggy says

I won "Loving My Actual Christmas" by Alexandra Kuykendall from Baker Books in a Goodreads giveaway. Ms. Kuykendall encourages us to join her in her experiment of celebrating this Christmas by relishing what is in Your life, right now; considering Your family's foibles; keeping in mind Your budget; working within Your reality. She takes us through the weeks of Advent by defining our expectations, developing a schedule, creating a budget and reading scriptural passages. Then she gets honest about how it's working for her! At the end of each week, there are reflection questions. One of the things I found most helpful was the focus on Christmastide, that period immediately following Christmas Day. The book is filled with practical helps, involving: planning ahead, recognizing limitations, making space, stopping and noticing, extending the season remembering the story and Christmas permeating the year. This is a book to plan to read each year, some time well before Dec. 1. I enjoyed the author's writing, but I particularly appreciated the content.

Becky says

Read it twice during advent and it saved my Christmas! "No complaining about Christmas" was my holiday mantra.

Julia says

Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment In Relishing The Season is a like a breath of fresh air for those women who get so caught up in trying to make Christmas "just right" that they collapse in sheer exhaustion by the time it's over. Vowing to do things differently the next year, they get caught in an endless cycle of feeling driven to do too much, never getting it all done, and completely bulldozing the entire point of Christmas in the process. Alexandra Kuykendall is one of those women. So am I.

So if that type of behavior is more common than we care to admit, what are we supposed to do about it? That's where this book comes in. In Loving My Actual Christmas, Alexandra proposes an experiment in her own life to change things up - to get away from the frantic rush of the season and get back to the roots behind it.

Breaking the holiday season into the four weeks of advent (hope, love, joy, and peace), and the twelve days of Christmastide, Alexandra journals her weekly focus and goals, as well as the daily reality as to how she managed the proper focus during such a hectic and stressful time of year. We see her struggles (both internal and external), her victories, and her shortcomings. She opens the door to her actual Christmas in order to help us better come to terms with our own - no matter how much we're struggling to just "get through" one more year of this holiday that seems to have lost so much of its brightness as the time has dragged on.

As someone who struggles with "doing it differently" every year and always ends up feeling like an epic

failure by the end of it all, I found Alexandra's approach to give me hope that maybe my Christmas doesn't have to follow the traditional chaos this year. Maybe I can refocus and relearn how to celebrate Christmas, while showing my kids that sometimes better also means simpler, slower, and more Christ-centered (something that's always been lacking in this humble abode).

I love that Alexandra approaches this experiment with complete openness and a blank slate, letting us see the less than perfect atmosphere of her own reality. She admits to her own shortcomings with brutal honesty so that we can see that whatever challenges we face, we're never truly alone in this struggle.

For each section of the Christmas season, Alexandra tells us her goals, scripture reading, what she learned, practices she'll continue, and suggested questions for how we can apply her experiment to our own life. She also includes a section of practical tips and strategies at the back of the book, full of mini-essays to help you better manage your holiday season. This includes things like scheduling principles, limiting commitments, navigating extended family relationships, and so much more.

I recommend this book for any woman who finds herself struggling year after year to just push through the holiday season, or for those women who find themselves burnt out on what they've always done and looking for a new perspective on how to make the holidays work - without losing the focus of what the holidays are all about. This book will help anyone to remember to slow down, breathe, and just enjoy the wonderful blessings that this holiday season represents, as well as learning how to bring those blessings into our modern and overbooked world. 5/5 stars.

Disclaimer: I received a complimentary print copy of this book from the publisher for the purpose of this honest review. All opinions are my own.

Terry Perrine says

Loving My Actual Christmas by Alexandra Kuykendall is the book I never knew I always needed! As I read through this book just a few days before Christmas, my only complaint is that I hadn't picked it up sooner. Alexandra uses an experimental style to determine those things that she feels are her absolute priorities during the Christmas season and then establishes her weeks leading up to Christmas around those priorities and nothing else. In this way, her goal is to "love her actual Christmas."

As I read this book, I considered that there were certainly ways I could adapt what I learned from Loving My Actual Christmas to my everyday life, and then I noticed that Loving My Actual Christmas is a "spin-off" of Alexandra's earlier book, Loving My Actual Life. An unexpected result of reading Loving My Actual Christmas is that I am now very interested in reading Loving My Actual Life. Until I do, I have taken some of the basic premises in this book and applied them to my goals for the new year. I also plan to re-read this book in November, to help plan for a Christmas that is focused around hope, love, joy, and peace throughout the Advent season, and avoids stress, obligations, exhaustion, and stretched finances!

I highly encourage everyone to journey with Alexandra Kuykendall through her experiment next Christmas, and learn how to relish the Season better!

I received this book free from Baker Books through the Baker Books Bloggers Program. The opinions I have expressed are my own, and I was not required to write a positive review.

Beth says

Well thought out book that provides the reader with a good sense of how to go through the Christmas season without losing their mind. The first two-thirds of the book focus on Kuykendall's experience through one Advent and Christmas season. The last third is practical application of her experience to our own. The book follows the traditional Advent structure and is a realistic look at how expectation plays a huge role in the Christmas experience. Highly recommended.

I received an advance reader copy of the book

Just Commonly says

"It is here, in the middle of my actual circumstances and holiday, where I look for a new way to do Christmas" (17)

Have you ever felt like the Christmas season is just another big "to-do" rather than a time to celebrate the true meaning of it? Well, you're not the only one. Alexandra Kuykendall, author of one of my favorite books last year, *Loving My Actual Life* penned another book on relishing the season, *Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season*. A personal memoir of how to really get back into the meaning of Christmas in her life, *Loving My Actual Christmas* like its predecessor allows readers to share in on this journey, and what an encouragement it is!

"This is the Christmas season. To pause from the hustle and remember." (70)

Encouragement for those that needs it, encouragement for those that seek it and encouragement for those that didn't even realize it. Day by day, with scripture and remembrance, and intention, we leave behind expectations, but relish in the message.

". . . the point of Christmas. The over and over. The message on repeat. In all circumstances. Whether we acknowledge it or not, this message of 'I love you,' this love note of a Savior wrapped in swaddling clothes - more importantly, wrapped in skin - is to be the wave over us every year. 'I love you.' And again, 'I love you.' And a year later, when we've had a heck of a go at life and things aren't looking as we thought they would or should, 'I love you' again." (91)

I also love her chapters of grace and gift giving. Awesome ideas as well as understanding. In all, *Loving My Actual Christmas* isn't just the author's experiment, it's an idea and an inspiration for readers to find that message in their daily life again, not just the season.

This review first appeared on Just Commonly blog.

Disclaimer: I received a copy of this book from the author/publisher. I was not required to write a positive review, and have not been compensated for this. This is my honest opinion.

Callie says

4.5/5 stars.

A little confession: I've struggled for the last several years to really enjoy the Christmas season. Maybe it's the extra pressure that comes from being a mom and having more people to juggle, maybe expectations outside our immediate family have ramped up...I don't know, but no matter how much I prepare, the season still seems to be more stressful than I would like.

Knowing this about myself, when I saw *Loving My Actual Christmas* by Alexandra Kuykendall, I knew I had to grab it. Because I am self-aware enough to realize that I do need to take some pressure off myself and learn to love the actual Christmas I have, even if it doesn't look the way I want.

This book is less a how-to, and more of a personal memoir of how the author herself managed to enjoy her Christmas even amidst all the hustle and bustle. Each chapter is centered around a week of the Christmas season and focuses on a theme - hope, love, joy, and peace. She writes about how her actual Christmas season pans out as she tries to keep her focus on these different themes each week.

It might seem like reading about someone else's Christmas experience wouldn't be overly helpful, but I actually found this whole book really encouraging. Because it wasn't perfect, and she was busy, and she cried a couple times, but in the end she found she enjoyed the season more because amidst the busyness she took time to focus on her themes, and how they relate to the reason we celebrate in the first place!

I loved how she ties it all back around to the nativity, and how God became a man in order to save us. It wasn't preachy, just reflective, and it gave me hope that maybe this Christmas season I can find time to prepare my heart too. That's really what I think I'm personally missing during December, the focus on Jesus's birth. I've usually blamed it on not enough time or space to really reflect, but I have tried preparing early and the busyness still gets to me - I need to find time to focus on Christ in the midst of all the Christmas tasks, and this book encouraged me that it's possible.

(I also just have to say that I LOVE the idea of Christmastide that she includes in this book - i.e.. extending the Christmas celebration and reflection beyond the actual holiday. I think this might provide me some of that space and time that I want so desperately at Christmas.)

The line that really got me was in the last part of this book:

"...I wondered if that's the point of this Christmas. The over and over. The message on repeat. In all circumstances. Whether we acknowledge it or not, this message of "I love you" this love note of a Savior wrapped in swaddling clothes - more importantly, wrapped in skin - is to be the wave over us every year. "I love you." And again, "I love you". And a year later, when we've had a heck of a go at life and things aren't looking as we thought the would or should, "I love you" again." pg. 91

Isn't that a beautiful way to look at the Christmas season? As a yearly reminder, a yearly "I love you" from the Lord. I hope to take that attitude with me this year and leave some of the stress behind.

Overall, I recommend this book if you are consistently finding yourself stressed out every Christmas season - it encouraged me, and I'm hoping to take some of her ideas into the season in a couple months!

Note: I received a copy of this book from the publisher for free in exchange for a review. This is my honest opinion.

Prairie Sky Book Reviews says

For many people, Christmas can be a rather controversial topic. It's supposed to be the "most wonderful time of the year", filled with reflection on the baby in a manger and quality time with family. While this may be the case to some degree, there's more to the story for most families. . . In reality, this season is also a time of hectic chaos, heartache that seems to build up from a difficult year, and frustration over what we wish was true but isn't. In a new book from Baker Publishing, "Loving My Actual Christmas: An Experiment in Relishing the Season", Alexandra Kuykendall unpacks some great insights into being present AND finding joy in our own actual, imperfect Christmases.

This little book is definitely one that should be on your reading list this autumn. Although it is directed at mothers with children at home, readers outside of this target audience (such as myself) are also certain to benefit from Alexandra's insight. While it doesn't take much time to read through this well-organized and packed-to-the-brim volume, the impact it can have on your holiday season is tremendous!

"Loving My Actual Christmas" starts out with chapters describing the preparations (both internal and external) that can take place during the four weeks of Advent (which of course also symbolize Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace), followed by a section on Christmastide, or the twelve days after Christmas Day. Next comes a conclusion to summarize the previous chapters, but the book doesn't end here. The final section, entitled "Making Your Actual Christmas Work: Practical Tips and Strategies for Your Holiday", contains easy-to-navigate ideas under such topics as Schedule, Finances, Relationships, Traditions, Commitments, Gift-giving, and more. Truly, if you've ever wished you could find a way to slow down and enjoy Christmas as you've always dreamed but never quite managed, "Loving My Actual Christmas" is a wonderful place to begin the journey of loving the season once again.

I am grateful to have received a copy of this book from Baker Books Bloggers, free of charge, in exchange for an honest review. All opinions expressed are my own.

Angie Fehl says

It all started with Alexandra Kuykendall's previous release, *Loving My Actual Life*, in which for an entire year she challenged herself to slow down a bit and take in the actual life she was living rather than the one she was obsessively trying to achieve through insane schedules, a go-go-go lifestyle and maybe a touch of subconsciously trying to compete with friends and neighbors for a mythical "best life" award. Using the format of that experiment, Kuykendall challenges herself once again, this time tackling the seemingly inevitable stress that comes with each year's impending holiday season -- the days packed with endless holiday festivities, the decorating, the blown out holiday budget that depresses her come January. She explains that her inspiration this time around was the realization that she did not want her daughters to grow up and have their dominant holiday memories be of stressed out, edgy and resentful parents. Instead, she wanted to put the need for perfection aside and just try to be present and authentically capture the true magic of Christmas for her girls. This year, Kuykendall wants to put the focus back on true family togetherness, charity, kindness, all those warm fuzzy emotions we ALL desperately need a good dose of right about now.

It's a tough year for Kuykendall, as it's the year her stepfather passed away, a man she had come to rely on as a loving, reliable male figure in her life (for more on the difficult relationship Kuykendall has with her birth father, check out her memoir, *The Artist's Daughter*). Hard as it will be to tackle a season of family gatherings without this important man there for her, Kuykendall works hard not to let the sadness tarnish the warm memories she wants to cultivate for her family.

In *Loving My Actual Christmas*, Kuykendall admits from the very beginning that this round will be slightly different because she is not working within the luxury of an entire year. We are talking about a season. So she gets the ball rolling in November, jumping right into family gatherings and activities around Thanksgiving, Christmas right around the corner. After moving passed Christmas, the book closes out a few days past the New Year (this past January 2017, as she notes that she started writing this book during 2016 holiday season).

Though she may not have a full year to work through, to give herself some sense of structure to this experiment, Kuykendall plots out the time frame of the experiment using the window of Advent (the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas Day) as well as Christmastide (more commonly known as the Twelve Days of Christmas), carrying through to just after New Year's celebrations. This book has the same diary-like layout as *Loving My Actual Life*. From day one, Kuykendall makes entries for every day of every week, giving readers a rundown of what the day's activities looked like, what she hopes to accomplish with that day, what she comes away with (lesson-wise) at day's end, and what Scripture she used that day to ponder on as she worked through each day's schedule. The entries are divided by Advent week and for each week she gives herself an overall theme to focus on:

Week 1 = HOPE

Week 2 = LOVE

Week 3 = JOY

Week 4 = PEACE

* and then a section that does an overview on her Christmastide experience

Each chapter closes on "Questions for Reflection", questions that help guide readers on their own journey of better appreciating the season. She also offers relevant scripture, so this book (as well as her previous experiment book) have potential to be used as devotional supplements. Kuykendall is quick to address that a lot of the issues / stressors she tackles in this book will likely come of as #firstworldproblems, but as she points out -- the experiments are called MY ACTUAL LIFE and MY ACTUAL CHRISTMAS... it might seem first world, but it is the life SHE is personally living, so we gotta let her do her thing.

What I love about these experiments of hers is that Kuykendall gives it to her readers honestly, warts and all. She fully admits to being human, starting with the best intentions and then getting in the moment and seriously wanting to throw in the towel instead. Immediately from Day 1 of her Christmas experiment she hits a wall. Not a good start, but a humorous and relatable one! She talks of facing the living room mantel, realizing she has to take down all the "harvest" decor to set up the Nativity scene... and she's honestly just not feelin' it, y'all! Who hasn't been there!

Also on this day she's hit with the first wave of holiday family travel plans (orchestrating all that) as well as trying to find time to sit down to do the obligatory Christmas cards. Those Christmas cards haunt her through many of the days, leading her to tell a story of when she just decided to NOT do cards one year, and guess what? There was a little guilt involved on her part, but no one died and no one disowned her. This spoke to my soul as it's exactly where I was last Christmas, and frankly I don't know that I'm feeling much for the cards this year, so it was nice to get a sense of camaraderie from that. Kuykendall encourages readers to still do cards, but do them for the right reason. Do it because you honestly love and miss these people and WANT to connect, don't just make it a chore to scratch off because you don't want things to get awkward later.

No big surprise, but one of Kuykendall's big takeaways from this project is that the best gift is really just giving someone time / attention / respect / love. If you love the act of bestowing physical gifts, just make

sure that the gifts show you LISTEN TO THEM. Don't get caught up in getting what everyone else seems to be buying -- unless, I guess, your people have expressed that's truly what they want with all their hearts. But in general, it's nice to give gifts that give a nod to something said in passing that shows you were listening even when they thought you weren't! ;-)

Other main points:

* Decide on a holiday budget and STICK TO IT. Also, it might help to make an inventory of all expected costs for the season -- what you anticipate to spend on holiday meals, outings, travel, holiday clothing, etc. Factor that into the overall "holiday budget" at the beginning of the season and you probably won't have quite as much sticker shock come January.

* As Kuykendall's husband kept telling her throughout this process: "No bad-mouthing Christmas!" Your season might still have an element of stress no matter what you do but don't blame the season, just find your zen again and remember the real "reason for the season".

* Learn to say "no" sometimes and be okay with it. Much of the stress of the season comes from us allowing ourselves to be roped into doing every little thing to ensure everyone else has the perfect season. Once in awhile, stop and say no. And then go let yourself have some you time so YOU can enjoy the season.

At the back of the book, Kuykendall also offers supplemental guides such as "Practical Tips and Strategies" where she outlines just how exactly she pulled off this experiment and how you can try it yourself. Within the guides she also encourages readers to engage in some moments of contemplation: evaluate family holiday traditions, WHY you still do them and should you continue with them or are you merely doing it out of habit? (Think: are the kids too old for it? Are there enough people that still enjoy the tradition or are you just forcing them through?). She gives you a really handy guide on ways to be more economical during the season as well as a pep talk on the power of "no thank you".

She closes with the plea to readers that while they go through this process (should they choose to, that is), in all things always strive to continually be kind, gracious and compassionate.

Near the end of the experiment, Kuykendall points out that throughout this process it is important to keep in mind that you can't (or at the very least, shouldn't) gloss over the hurts and struggles of the year with a simple dusting of tinsel, a few rounds of carols and a nice mug of eggnog (if eggnog is your thing). Kuykendall advises readers to remember the Nativity story: all the struggles that were going on in that time in history, how so many people craved a positive change for peace... and what happened? A star suddenly appeared in the night sky shining a light so bright as to leave any observer awe-struck, so bright as to be able to guide three wise men to a random manger. A light in the darkness. The darkness doesn't go away for good, but having your heart in the right place helps keeps the hardships at bay. That's the idea here. Acknowledge the struggles but embrace the joy and grace found behind them. We will likely always be trying to fight off one evil or another in the world, but Kuykendall encourages you, when faced with dark times, to allow yourself to still be in awe of the marvels & beauties in the world, because if you keep yourself open enough, they will remind you that they are still out there. As she says, "This is a year to celebrate the good news within the context of our actual lives."

FTC Disclaimer: Baker Books kindly provided me with a complimentary copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. The opinions above are entirely my own.

Amy Langmaack says

But it doesn't have to be that way. In *Loving My Actual Christmas*, Alexandra Kuykendall reminds us that we can relish the season despite all of the chaos and busyness culture pushes us towards. In this book, she takes us on a journey through Advent and how to apply the hope, love, joy, and peace through the season. Each chapter introduces the need, how Kuykendall plans to live out the specific aspect of Advent, a glimpse into her day to day through the week, and some questions for reflection.

At first, I thought it may be too early to begin thinking about Christmas. But as I continued to read *Loving My Actual Christmas*, I realized planning ahead is most definitely the only way to thrive through the season rather than merely surviving.

Reading the pages of this book had me dreaming about new ideas for how to handle the Christmas season. Especially since Sarabeth is still little, I've tried to really think through the traditions we want to begin for our family. It's easy to plan broad and grand plans, but then, when it comes to actually living them out, it's not so easy. Now, I've got several questions that will help me think through whether or not the ideas and plans I've had will bring joy or stress.

I loved that Kuykendall added a chapter on Christmastide. As I've thought a little bit about the liturgical calendar, I've seen Christmastide as part of the season. And having a grandpa who was born in Canada, I've known about Boxing Day but never really understood what it is for. I love that Kuykendall unpacked all of this a little more. Now, rather than rushing to be done with Christmas before New Year's, I want to be able to enjoy the season a little longer, and use that time to celebrate a little bit more!

I can't wait for this Christmas season. Now that Sarabeth is old enough to really understand what is going on, we'll be able to engage in some fun family traditions that we can keep through the years.

I received a copy of this book from Baker Books. This review is my own, honest opinion.

J.K. Turner says

My Rating - If you are looking for something

Level - Short, easy book

Summary

I think the best summary of this book comes from the subtitle of the intro chapter - *A Recalibrating of the Season*. That would be the Christmas and Advent seasons, both the secular and Christian aspects. Her goal in writing this is to help people get past the over commercialized, hectic and stressful parts of the American Christmas season. She advocates doing an Advent devotional/study to help ground you in the Christian aspect.

So much so, that the majority of the book is her going through the four weeks of advent, what she did that week in actual life and what she did as far as reading, studying, and being thankful.

She finishes up the book with a conclusion that is about half as long as the entire book, because there are so many sub parts - scheduling, finances, relationships, and logistics. This is where the book takes a turn from reflection to more practical tips.

My Thoughts

I wasn't really a fan of this book, not because it is poorly written or has a bad message or anything of that nature. The main issue - I'm quite far from the target audience. She is one of these busy Christian women with four or five kids that is heavily involved with a number of things and is constantly stressed. I'm a father of one, and overall pretty chill guy. I don't really relate to the pressure and stress of mom bloggers with multiple active kids.

If that is you, then this will probably be a great book to help ground you for the holidays. Another thing I didn't know when I requested this book, it is a spin off of her other book - Loving My Actual Life: An Experiment in Relishing What's Right in Front of Me. So, to be fair to the author, had I known about this book, I would have known more about her writing and audience and likely wouldn't have requested this book. However, judging by the other reviews, had you read that book and enjoyed it, then you will also like this book.

I thought her reflections on the Advent devotional were interesting, and more importantly, it will help introduce some people to the concept of Advent. Most American Evangelical churches do not use a liturgical calendar, which can be very helpful in keeping your mind focused on Christ throughout the year. So if nothing else, if readers decide to start an advent devotion for themselves or a tradition with the whole family from reading this book, then it will have been a great success.

Finally, her concluding thoughts were very practical and useful. If you are the target audience, they are also probably pretty helpful in reminding you not to go to wild and over-schedule yourself too much, both time-wise and financially. Overall, if you fit in this category and are looking for something on the topic of handling the season, this is probably a good book for you.

*I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

More reviews at MondayMorningTheologian.com

Michele Morin says

Loving My Mid-Life Christmas

For the past several years, change has been the only constant in our Christmas celebration.

Grown-up sons marry, pack up their collection of treasured ornaments, and hang them on their own trees. College guys come home when they can and join in the fun on an intermittent schedule. Teens branching into individualized creativity stride manfully into the woods—ax in hand—and return bearing a Charlie Brown tree for their bedroom, which they will festoon with enough lights to interfere with normal sleep patterns.

Our Christmas gatherings have become a moving target with a schedule that requires both flexibility and diplomacy, but I'm learning to appreciate the Christmas that is and to let Christmas past be past, fondly remembered but not lessening my enjoyment of the here and now.

Alexandra Kuykendall, author of Loving My Actual Christmas, struggled with loving “Christmas present.” Visions of Pinterest perfection left her exhausted and so “done” with the holiday that she finished the season by stripping the decorations off the tree and stuffing them into their boxes, not caring if she ever saw them again.

In addition, Norman Rockwell gatherings around a flawless feast didn't match the reality of the recent loss of her father and the empty chair at the table.

Alexandra wanted to make some changes that would bring joy back into her celebration of Jesus' birthday. She conducted an experiment that she hoped would help her to capture the essence of the season, and Loving My Actual Christmas is her lab report.

She longed to set her family up for success by lowering expectations, lightening their load, and limiting their activity level. To accomplish this, she introduced her family to the celebration of Advent, a slow, methodical re-calibration of their approach to marking the holiday.

We've observed Advent every year with our family and have found that extending the celebration of the season over the entire month of December takes the pressure off parents who want to more intentionally consider the theological implications of the Christmas story. An Advent celebration means the Baby Jesus does not have to compete with the shiny new LEGO set on the morning of December 25.

Hope

Formulating honest wishes and realistic hopes for our Christmas season sets the foundation for enjoying one's "actual Christmas." Right-sizing expectations and then communicating well, creating a budget early on, and staying in touch with the transforming truth of the Christmas story are a few ways to realize those hopes.

Love

God's love for His children is not connected (either positively or negatively) to our to-do list. Focusing on God's unconditional love, shown by His gift of the Baby in the manger, makes the holiday hoopla more meaningful and emphasizes the truth that Christmas is all about people.

Alexandra made this resolution for the season: "When given the choice between getting something done and enjoying the moment, I will take the moment."

Joy

If, as C.S. Lewis has said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven," it behooves us to take it more seriously here on planet Earth. Dealing with grief over the loss of her father, Alexandra wondered if joy could grow in the context of her deep sadness. She discovered that complaining was a joy slayer, that joy can be "quiet and steady," and that by inviting others into her home, she turned the spotlight of her attention away from herself and focused instead on how she could serve and encourage her guests. The end result was a joy that was "part tactical execution, part heart work."

Peace

In the fourth week of Advent, stress can demolish not only peace, but also love, joy, and hope if panic leads to blowing the budget, losing our temper, and resorting to sugar-fueled, all-nighters of wrapping gifts and addressing Christmas cards. This is the moment for flexibility: modifying or eliminating whatever won't work; hanging on to those realistic expectations set up in week one; and sticking close to the story that featured a manger, a fairly awkward set of circumstances, and all the messiness and chaos that surround a new birth.

As my family and I celebrate Christ's birth once again this year, we will do it with the uniqueness of a Morin Christmas. It will be different from yours—no better, no worse. The goal is to celebrate the birth of our Savior

in the language my family understands. This year, only one son will be home full-time for our Advent celebration. The others will come and go as college schedules, work responsibilities, in-law expectations, and their own growing independence dictates.

If my heart can receive “My Actual Christmas” with hope, love, joy and peace, the gift will come in the form of a bit more quiet; a slower disappearance of the Christmas cookies; a less-frenzied, more contemplative celebration of Advent Truth; and time spent with my good husband over cups of Christmas tea.

We both remember enjoying holidays alone before children arrived; we can enjoy it again someday if the occasion arises. In the meantime, when the nativity scene gets packed away after Christmas, I will find myself taking special care with the figures of Mary and Joseph. I’ll wrap them carefully and place them side by side in the box for the long dark of another year in the attic. I’m glad they have each other, and I wonder what Christmas will look like next year when they see daylight again.

This book was provided by Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, in exchange for my review. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission’s 16 CFR, Part 255: “Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising.”

Katherine Jones says

Ho ho ho already? Oh no no no! If you’re anything like me, you’re nowhere near ready to begin thinking about Christmas, much less begin planning for it. Fall has only just arrived, after all, and we have weeks of laid-back, autumnal beauty to enjoy before we charge into the hectic pace of what’s commonly known as The Holiday Season.

But that’s just it. Since when is that hectic pace something any of us actually love?

Truth is, a little forethought and preparation can go a long way to allowing moms to slow down enough to relish the season. Which is where Alexandra Kuykendall’s latest book comes in.

As a practical follow-on to its predecessor, *Loving My Actual Life*, *Loving My Actual Christmas* aligns itself in much the same groove. Part inspirational memoir, part practical guide, it frames itself as an experiment, providing tactics to try and then keep or discard depending on how well they actually work.

For me, the best part of Alexandra’s book is the personal touch in which she shares snippets of her real life that make me feel as if we’re having an open-hearted conversation rather than me reading her prescriptive book. I also love at the end of each chapter her list of “Practices I’ll Continue,” which give me a snapshot of the best takeaways from each experiment.

While I’m still not prepared to begin playing Christmas carols in my home, I am ready to follow Alexandra’s example. Thanks to the ideas I found in her book, I have already taken my first few practical steps toward making this coming holiday season one I will actually relish.

Thanks to the author and Baker Books for providing me this book free of charge. All opinions are mine.
