

A Very Tov Advent Devotional

Week 1 | Hope | Jenni Curtin

As a little girl growing up in Indiana and now an adult woman with over 30 years living in Michigan, you might be surprised to hear about my very southern roots. Both sets of my grandparents are from the South, Missouri and Kentucky, and my cooking has been heavily influenced by their southern ways. Most notably, copious amounts of butter and sugar have been the culinary theme of my life, and certainly of my holidays. My maternal grandmother, Virgie Parrent, made my favorite Christmas candy delight—Kentucky Cream Candy. This rich, buttery goodness has the consistency of a butter mint that melts in your mouth, but it's creamier. Her stash always had the added hint of coffee in the taste, as she stored it in her empty coffee cans. I can still remember her pulling it off the top of the refrigerator and peeling back the plastic lid, allowing me to grab my first piece of the holiday. I'm guessing I was six years old the last time I had a piece of her candy. She passed away in October the following year, right after my seventh birthday. Cancer made its way into this lovely story, spoiling and stealing a significant part of the goodness that had defined my little life up until that day.

Holidays came and went, and extended family always prioritized gathering and recreating our family recipes for each event. But when it came to this beloved cream candy, no one had the courage to tackle it. "It's tricky," "Very tricky," "The weather has to be just right," "It burns the living daylights out of your hands." As a teen, I suggested we try it, but I was so discouraged by the hopelessness in the voices of my mother and aunts that I immediately gave up the idea, certain that this goodness was only for other, more capable and skilled women to make—not me, a teenage girl with virtually no candy-making experience.

As an adult, I once again got a hankering for Kentucky cream candy. And I told you, we're from the deep South, so we use the word "hankering." This time, when I brought it up, the nagging "It's not cold enough" argument was made. It bugged me. Why was this candy too much? What did those Kentucky women 40 years ago have that I didn't? And wait a minute—how cold is cold enough? After all, these women lived in the middle of Kentucky, and I live in Michigan. We may have a different definition of cold. Against all odds, I made cream candy. I hauled out my grandmother's marble slab and set it outside to chill. I mixed the ingredients and watched the steaming pot. I watched a candy thermometer barely rise. I waited and waited and waited for it to reach the magic 260 degrees. I poured it on the buttered and chilled slab, and then my family jumped in to help me do something I had never seen done. I'd only heard stories of how this candy was now to be handled. They were right. It does burn the living daylights out of your hands, and it does feel frantic and unsure. The timing of when to stop pulling and drop it into ropes and start cutting is less science and more art. It's something you learn to get better at each time you make it. It turned out not perfectly, but there was enough resemblance for me to know that if I kept at it, I could probably get there someday. It was worth it.

So, what does this cream candy have to do with this, the very first week of Advent?

Well, this week we are asked to focus our attention on hope. At the core of hope is the smallest, sometimes almost imperceptible idea that something might be possible. For me, all those years ago, it was a small hope that this candy might just turn out. In the Christmas carol *O Holy Night*, the writer says, “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.” Hope is indeed thrilling. Even the smallest amount of hope evokes a thrill deep in our souls.

As Christmas approaches, I would love for us all to consider the goodness that the birth of Christ claims to make available to those who follow him. What do you want to hope for? Do you need the joy of past years restored? What about even further back? Do you feel a deep truth that this world isn't how it was intended to be? That it needs to be restored? Do you have hope that God could actually do that? Like I did with that candy, have you listened to voices that have made you believe that there is a sweet goodness in life with Christ, but it must be only for other, more capable people? Or have you disqualified yourself in your own mind from being able to enjoy the goodness he wants to provide?

This life with Christ is actually a lot like this candy. It begins with hope. It involves a lot of waiting, and there are painful moments that are necessary to the process and for success. And in the end, it is so worth it. During this first week of Advent, I am praying that all who hear these words will be able to perceive even the smallest spark of hope—that maybe this infant Jesus came for them too. Not just the really good people who have all their stuff together. I am praying that each person this reaches will pause and pray a simple prayer: “Jesus, please give me hope. Please show me the next step to take to engage in the sweet goodness you make available to me. Please give me eyes to see myself as eligible to receive this greatest gift you have offered to all who will receive you and the life you offer.”

The word *tov* means good, with the potential for even more good. Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.” First he fills, and then hope abounds. We only need to ask.