

My dear family and friends,

Apologies for the belatedness of this Christmas letter, though, as I asked my dad, can you really be late for something that happened two thousand years ago?

I've spent a lot of time in the past months thinking about the stories we associate with Christmas: not only the story of Jesus' birth, but also the myriad legends that have sprung up around the holiday. I've watched Christmas movies, from old favorites like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *Love, Actually* to new releases like *Hot Frosty* (surprisingly cute). But the movie that I believe resonated most with the Christmas story this year will probably surprise you: it was *Wicked*.

A story about witches may seem better suited to Halloween, but *Wicked* and the Christmas story both revise a very old plot: the fallen woman narrative. In fallen woman narratives, which were especially popular in the nineteenth century, a woman who succumbs to temptation (often sexual) is destined to die; think of characters like Fantine in *Les Misérables*, Anna Karenina, and Madame Bovary.¹ The narrative itself is far older, however. We could say that the original fallen woman was Eve herself, whose sin brought death into the world. Eve's story has been used to justify misogyny for millenia, enabling men to blame women for all sorts of evils.



My friend Emily and I dressed as Elphaba and Glinda in 2007

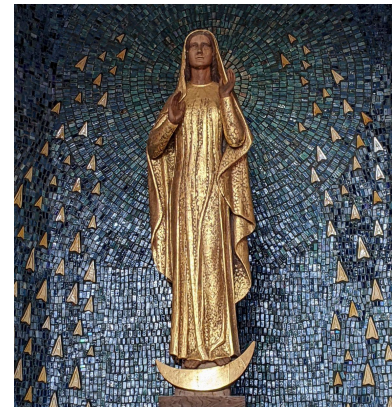
Wicked too is a fallen woman narrative: the musical opens with news of the Wicked Witch's death, so we know from the beginning where the story of the rebellious Elphaba is headed. *Wicked*, however, offers a twist on the narrative: Elphaba is a caring young woman ostracized first because she is different (aka green) and then because she challenges the Wizard, calling out the injustices he has perpetrated. The Wizard is the one who is truly wicked, slandering an innocent girl to protect his own name and power.²

While viewers may understand the truth about Elphaba, within the world of Oz, she and her efforts are doomed. The Christmas story, in contrast, offers a more hopeful revision of the fallen woman narrative. Mary appears to be another fallen woman, pregnant

¹ Many thanks to my wonderful PhD advisor Deborah Nord for teaching me about the fallen woman.

² Aubrey Plaza and Dan Murphy's lovely picture book [The Legend of the Christmas Witch](#) makes a similar point.

outside of wedlock. According to Jewish law, such women could be stoned, though we are told that her fiancé Joseph “only” plans to quietly divorce her, still leaving her ruined and unmarriageable. Yet Mary is not only innocent; she has been chosen by God Himself to be the mother of His Son. Her story reverses the fallen woman narrative; instead of dying, Mary is blessed and honored. In some traditions, she goes on to become Queen of Heaven. Rather than scapegoating a woman, the Bible makes clear that the real villain is, as in *Wicked*, a powerful man. Herod may pretend to be good, but he is actually a murderous monster. In aligning himself with the maligned mother and not the power-hungry patriarch, God makes clear whose side he is on. He is not a God who rules through domination and oppression. Instead, He challenges the hierarchies of this world and champions the small, the weak, and the powerless.



Statue of Mary at Aylesford Priory

As Mary sings in the Magnificat, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones / but has lifted up the humble.”³ God, we might say, is holding space for us to defy gravity.

It has grieved me to see many whom I love deceived by another strongman claiming to serve God but actually motivated by greed and ego, especially because many of the lies he tells are about women like me. I am a single, childless dog mom. I am a liberal academic who teaches my students about the impact of gender, race, and class on our society. And I am deeply loved by God. If you have taken the side of the man who is now President, a man whose character is so antithetical to that of Christ, then you are not on my side, and I don’t believe that you are on God’s side either. I pray for freedom from the blindness and moral relativism that have taken hold of our country, that we would again be able to judge truly not based on the color of a person’s skin or their gender, but by the content of their character.⁴



³ Luke 1:52

⁴ “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Life Updates

It's been a tough year for the Rogers family. My maternal grandfather, whom we called Haha, passed away in January. My dad was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis in February and had to give up diving at the Georgia Aquarium after seventeen years. He's taking medicine to slow the progression, but it has a lot of side effects and often leaves him feeling unwell. Around the same time, I left the church I was attending after being refused accommodations for my autism.⁵ In April, I had to go on medical leave from my job teaching high school English due to the severe autistic burnout I was experiencing, from which I am still recovering.⁶ I had hoped to finish out the year but was pressured to go on leave by the school administration after I attempted to report bullying that was happening in my class. At the same time, three of my closest friends chose to stop speaking to me rather than work through conflict together; sadly, I remain estranged from all three. Since I am currently unable to work, I've moved in with my dad, which has been a challenging transition for both of us but especially isolating for me.

However, in the midst of all of this pain, I have seen God at work. I have learned, like Mary, to value His opinion of me over the judgments of others⁷ and to trust in His faithfulness even when others disappoint me. As my time teaching high school came to an end, He inspired me with an idea for a book about how recent Disney movies (*Encanto* and the *Frozen* and *Moana* films) use Christian symbolism to tell stories of emotional healing and growth, which I am currently researching and making notes for.

He also gave my dad and me opportunities to travel. In addition to visits to Grand Cayman and Colorado, my dad went on another mission trip to Montreal. This summer, I went on a trip to England led by my friend Abby and her mom, walking the Pilgrim's Way from Winchester to Canterbury.⁸ It was an amazing chance to learn more about Medieval Christianity and to reflect on my own journey with God. Afterward, my dad flew over, and we spent time in London and Oxford and then flew to Ireland for a road trip down the country's west coast. And in the fall, my dog Pippa and I went on a month-long road trip up



Gap of Dunloe, Ireland

⁵ If you missed that update, I received a formal diagnosis in October 2023. If you want to learn more about what autism looks like in women and girls, this [webpage](#) is a good starting point.

⁶ Autistic burnout is different from occupational burnout because in addition to chronic exhaustion, it involves increased sensory sensitivities and decreased functioning/life skills.

⁷ Another implication of Mary's story is that we do not have to yield to the judgments of those in authority but can trust our own consciences. In Charlotte Brontë's words, "If all the world hated you and believed you wicked, while your own conscience approved of you and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends" (*Jane Eyre*).

⁸ I plan to go on Pilgrimage with them again this summer, this time in the North of England. If you want to learn more or are interested in joining, check out their [website](#)!

the East Coast and into the Canadian Maritimes (hello Green Gables!), visiting friends and attending a literature conference along the way.

God has shown up for me this year, but few people have.⁹ The Christmas story reminds us what true love looks like: God doesn't merely care from a distance; instead, He is with us, loving and serving and putting our needs before His own. I think that many people have created lives for themselves so busy that they have little margin for this kind of love, especially not for those outside their immediate families. So I end this letter with a challenge: to make space in your life to love people like me—those who do not have partners to care for them, those who live with chronic illnesses, those who are often made to feel like outsiders. What would it look like not merely to feel love for us, but actually to communicate it in words and actions?¹⁰ I believe that we all will need a lot more of that kind of Christlike love if we're going to make it through the coming years. I know I do.¹¹

With love,
Hope

⁹ To those who have stuck with me and supported me this year, I offer my deepest gratitude.

¹⁰ See Matthew 25:31-46 and James 2:15-16. Honestly, though, occasional texts or calls just checking in would be a good start.

¹¹ If you're looking for an opportunity to show me some love, my birthday is on Monday (January 27)!