



The Christmas That Almost Wasn't

Discussion and Activity Guide

BY LAURA ALARY



The Christmas that Almost Wasn't is a story about many things: disappointment, spoiled plans, caring for neighbors, finding hope and comfort, and learning to see God in every place and time—even the difficult ones. Here are some ideas for helping young readers engage with and respond to the book through art, conversation, and action.



About the Author

Laura Alary is a storyteller, educator, mother of three, and picture book author. Her book *All the Faces of Me* was named a 2024 Charlotte Zolotow Award Honor Book. She is also the author of *Here: The Dot We Call Home*, *Make Room: A Child's Guide to Lent and Easter*, and *The*

Astronomer Who Questioned Everything, among many others. Laura lives with her family in Toronto, where she once spent a very chilly and memorable Christmas after the ice storm of 2013.



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Beautiful and Terrible

When Aidan looks out and sees the ice coated branches glittering in the sunshine, then realizes the storm has ruined all his plans, he wonders: *How can the world be so beautiful and so terrible at the same time?* When two things that seem like opposites are both true at the same time, we call this a paradox. Paradoxes can be hard and confusing, like when you love someone but are also angry with them. In this story, Aidan has a lot of mixed-up feelings, as we all do sometimes.

Something to Talk About

Aidan has clear ideas about how Christmas should be. There are specific things he is looking forward to. What are they? What happens instead?

Have you ever felt disappointed when your plans were spoiled? Has this ever happened at Christmas? Did anyone or anything help you feel better?

Something to Do

Sometimes when we are disappointed or sad it helps to express those hard feelings through words or pictures. In the Bible, the book of Psalms is filled with the poems and songs of people who poured out hard emotions to God. Sometimes they asked for help and sometimes they just told God how angry or upset they felt. This is called *lament*. You can make your own lament psalm or picture. Here's how:

- **Write your own lament psalm:** Start with a favorite name for God (e.g., helper, shepherd, spirit, rock, mother or father), then tell God what has happened to make you disappointed or upset. Be specific. The writers of the psalms often used words like *why* and *how long* to ask God when these hard feelings would go away. You could do that too. If you want, end by asking for help or telling God what you hope for. Or write a reassuring thought, like a reminder that God hears our prayers, and we are never alone.
- **Salty watercolor:** Use watercolors to make a painting that shows how you feel about something sad or disappointing that happened. While the paint is still wet, sprinkle salt over it. Talk about how our salty tears are welcome and safe with trusted grownups and with God. Read Psalm 56:8 which imagines God collecting our tears in a bottle. How does it feel to think of God welcoming our hard feelings?



Name:

Date:

Lament Psalm

Your favorite name for God:

_____ ,

Tell God what has happened to make you disappointed or upset:

If you want, end by asking for help or telling God what you hope for. Or write a reassuring thought, like a reminder that God hears our prayers, and we are never alone:

Gifts of Darkness and Light

During Advent and Christmas we often speak of Jesus as the *Light of the World*. This is a beautiful image. The problem is it can make us think of light as good and dark as bad. But darkness and light need each other, in the Christmas story, and in the world around us.

Something to Talk About

When his mom tells the Christmas story by candlelight, even though Aidan has heard it before this time he hears something new.

Why do you think Aidan notices different things in the story this time?

Something to Do

- **Candlelight story time:** With the help of a grownup, light a candle and read the stories of the birth of Jesus aloud from the bible (Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-40 and Matthew 1:18-2:15) or a favourite story bible. Pay attention to what you imagine different characters might be feeling. Is anyone disappointed? Scared? Lonely? Worried? Where do you notice darkness and light in the story? (For example, Jesus grows in the darkness of Mary's womb, and the Magi follow the light of a star, which can only be seen in the dark.)
- **Dark and light pictures:** Using wax crayons, colour a picture on a piece of white paper. Press hard and cover as much of the white space as you can. Then colour over the whole thing with a black or dark blue crayon. Using a toothpick, create a new picture by scraping away the surface color so the colors underneath show through. You could also color a picture with crayons, then paint over it with black or dark blue paint. This is called a resist painting, because the wax crayons resist the paint. In both these ways of making pictures, you need both dark and light colors.
- **Dark and light collage:** You could also make a picture by tearing up pages from old magazines and glueing the pieces to a piece of card stock. Try to tear pieces that are mostly dark or mostly light. Then mix them up to create a new piece of art that has both dark and light in it.

Something to Read

Here are two books that celebrate the goodness of darkness, to help balance our celebration of the goodness of light:

Who Needs the Dark? The Many Ways Living Things Depend on Darkness by Laura Alary and Risa Hugo (Owlkids, 2025)

God's Holy Darkness by Sharei Green, Beckah Selnick, and Nikki Faison (Beaming Books, 2022)



Shining in the Darkness

One year, just before Christmas, I was feeling sad because I was missing my mom and dad. Early in the evening, the doorbell rang. It was a family from down the street, pulling a wagon full of homemade cookies. They handed me a little box of treats, wished me a Merry Christmas, then rolled off to the next house. I closed the door with a smile on my face, feeling much brighter and less alone.

Something to Talk About

When Aidan's neighbor opens her door and finds Aidan and his dad standing there with coffee and doughnuts she exclaims, "You are like lights in the darkness!"

What do you think she means?

Has someone ever been a light in the darkness for you?

Have you ever been a light in the darkness for someone else?

Something to Do

- **Make cards:** A hand-made card always brightens someone's day. You could even make one of the light and dark paintings described above, cut it into smaller rectangles, and paste them to the front of blank cards. Write your own message and hand-deliver the notes or send them in the mail.
- **Bake cookies:** Use a favorite family recipe or find a new one and bake some cookies (or search for a recipe for no-bake cookies, if you prefer). With the help of a grownup, box some up and deliver them to neighbors and friends.



It Feels Like Christmas!

When I was growing up, specific things made it feel like Christmas. There were smells, like the tang of spruce boughs and the scent of the mandarin oranges we could only buy in December. There were sounds, like the hymns we sang in church. And there were sights, like candles in the windows and colored lights reflected on the snow. My kids say that singing Silent Night by candlelight feels like Christmas to them. What feels like Christmas to you?

Something to Talk About

When one disappointment after another spoils his plans, Aidan loses all his sparkle. He feels like Christmas has been spoiled. But then, something happens when his mom tells the Christmas story by candlelight. Aidan starts to imagine himself in the story. Suddenly he feels close to people way back then and here and now, even those far away. For the first time it feels like Christmas.

Why do you think it feels like Christmas for Aidan now? What has changed?

Something to Do

- **Candle Prayers:** With the help of a grownup, light a candle. Sit and enjoy the light together. Then think about people you love, including those who have died or are far away. Pray for each of them using this simple prayer:

Into this Light I bring...[name]

Name as many people as you want. When you are finished, say:

Thank you, God, for holding us all together in your love. Amen.

When you extinguish the candle, notice how the smoke and scent spread through the room. The Light is still with you even if you can't see it.

- **Candle decorating:** Make your own Christ candle by cutting out shapes from pieces of decorating wax (you can find them at craft stores or online), softening them in your hands, and pressing them onto a large pillar candle.

