

GOD WITH US



ELCA World Hunger
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Advent Study
2020

WEEK 1

"KEEP AWAKE"

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
I Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

This year has felt like an awful lot of waiting already, and now here we are at the start of Advent, a season of ... *waiting*. Many greeted the new year with expectant hope. Early reports signaled a strong harvest year for farmers. Economic news in the United States seemed to be largely positive, though critical issues of poverty and inequality remained present. The year, for many, looked promising.

But how quickly things change. By mid-March, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and economies started grinding to a virtual halt. Of course, the risk wasn't the same for everyone, as we knew from the start. The lives of older adults and people with compromised immune systems or underlying health conditions were at significant risk. Small-business owners, service industry workers and farmworkers faced increasingly dire consequences for their livelihoods. In the United States, communities of color saw rates of infection, hospitalization and death that were many times higher than those of white communities. As the disease spread around the world, the uneven risk was brought into sharper relief – between wealthy countries and countries with fewer economic resources and lower access to high-quality, affordable health care. The inequities within countries, including the United States, was also brought into sharper relief.

Perhaps never before has so much of the world been glued to statistical data, watching every release of new case counts, changes in positivity rates, and testing capacity. We waited together for stores to reopen, for furloughs to end and for the chance to visit loved ones. As church, we waited for the chance to dine together

at the table of communion, even as the Spirit refused to postpone inspiring the people of God to worship in new, creative ways.

Together, we felt the inertia and anxiety of waiting for good news about progress on vaccines or positivity rates. On the other hand, some commenters encouraged others to view the pandemic and its accompanying shutdowns as a welcome “pause,” a slowdown of the hurried pace of daily life. And perhaps, for some of us, the pause has been an opportunity to take a break and reflect on which demands on our time and attention are truly valuable.

But something is missing in this picture of the pandemic as a restorative period of reflective waiting. So many of us this year, and every year, do not have the privilege of uninterrupted self-reflection. The service industry workers and gig workers who immediately lost their jobs, or whose continued employment meant entering a scary field of person-to-person encounters, did not have the privilege of merely “waiting it out” in hope that the pandemic would ease. The millions of people in the United States and around the world who face severe food insecurity could not merely wait for sustenance or stability.

In a letter earlier this year, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton wrote of the converging of two deadly viruses – COVID-19 and the ongoing virus of racism that continues to infect our communities and institutions. The distress named by Bishop Eaton in her letter is a more visceral and accurate description of what so many of us felt this year. The cries of people raised in supplication during the pandemic and lifted in protest are the cries of those who can no longer wait.

This Advent season opens with a story of another people sick of waiting. The Gospel of Mark, most likely, was written to the community of early Christians living under the shadow of empire in first-century Rome. This early community faced persecution and violence. They were no strangers to suffering.

Amid this suffering, Jesus, using what is often a general reference to humanity in Hebrew, promises them a future in which the “Son of Man” will come “with great power and glory” (13:26) to set all things right. In the meantime, he tells them, “Keep awake” (13:37).

To “keep awake” is to grasp the kind of hope that inspires and to

renounce the kind of hope that incapacitates. It is to feed on the hope that propels and to starve the hope that paralyzes. It is the gospel hope that tells us not to "wait and see" but to "come and see."

Em Musa, a grandmother in Ramallah, Palestine, knows that "just waiting" is a luxury she and her community cannot afford. Married at 20, mother to four children, Em Musa had more than enough responsibilities to occupy her time. But she also knew that her community in Palestine could not wait for progress. So, she chose to work toward justice for her people by becoming active in the Palestinian resistance movement. To this day, she bears the scars of this decision. In her time as an activist, she was wounded on her forehead, shot in her left thigh and imprisoned for almost a year and a half. Her husband passed away after her release, when their youngest child was just two-and-a-half years old.

Today, Em Musa participates in a Meals on Wheels project in Ramallah that is supported, in part, by ELCA World Hunger. The aim of the program is to help people isolated by health, age or circumstance experience a sense of community in addition to the food provided. The weekly gatherings help participants build connections with one another and with volunteers and staff, while home delivery of food meets the needs of people unable to come to the Arab Women's Union due to health or limited mobility. A physician is available once a week, and the Meals on Wheels program helps distribute some of the medication needed by participants such as Em Musa.

Em Musa's thirst for justice led her to costly activism, and now her hunger, for both food and community, has led her to the Meals on Wheels program. The ministries and programs supported by ELCA World Hunger are driven forward not merely by a deep awareness of the need in our communities but also by an even deeper awareness that, amid struggles for justice and wholeness, God will "strengthen [us] to the end" (I Cor. 1:8) – and what an end it will be!

As we enter this season of Advent, may we do so knowing that to hope in God is not to wait but to "keep awake," not to lose hope when faced with challenges but to confront them together. To hope is to know that the coming of Christ happens amid daily life and all its struggles. It is amid those things where relationships are birthed and renewed and where God is, even now, at work.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) Where have you found hope in the past year?
- 2) How can or has hope for the future motivated you to work for justice in the present?
- 3) What is your hope for the future? How is God calling you to make this hope a reality?
- 4) How is the church called to “keep awake” amid the suffering and injustices uncovered by the pandemic and all that has happened this year?
- 5) What can we do to make sure that our Advent discipline of “staying awake” does not become passive waiting?

PRAYER

Gracious God, you sustain your people through seasons of change and challenge. Breathe into us your Spirit, drive us from our waiting places and into the world to be part of the promise you proclaim. Inspire us with hope and courage to confront our needs – for justice, for health, for liberation, for one another and for you – and restore our relationships with one another and with all of creation. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

WEEK 2

"PREPARE"

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
II Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Even as we enter this season of anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ, our focus for this year is on the nearness of God. While our biblical ancestors awaited the coming of God's promised Messiah, they still knew that God was never far from them and their plight.

The Gospel of Mark, like the Gospel of John, does not include a story of Jesus' birth. Instead, it opens with a very different scene – the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of the Promised One and baptizing disciples in the river. John declares, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (1:3). His message echoes the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3 of the approaching dawn of God's promise to set all things right.

Both the original prophecy and John's repetition are clear about what we are waiting for – the "day of the Lord." The preparations the gospel enjoins are not preparations made amid absence, like the preparations that might be made for a visitor. The prophecies, instead, are precursors to an event. The message is not that *God* is coming at some time in the future but that the *day* is on its way.

This is an important distinction. So often, we view the future with expectant hope that God will come and set all things right. This kind of forward-looking hope is important. But this yearning for the fulfillment of God's promise must be tempered by the faith that sees God already at work in the world as it is. We are not waiting on God; if anything, perhaps God is waiting on us (II Peter 3:9). John's message is a reminder that, even as we await the final fulfillment of the promise, God is already at work, weaving the

threads of God's promise for us in our midst. To "prepare" is to "make straight" the ways, that is, to be about the ministry of the church now, participating in the work of justice and the full and final reconciliation God is making possible, even as we long for the day to come.

This message of active anticipation can be seen in a story of communities living around two different rivers, thousands of miles from the Jordan. In El Salvador, families from eight communities are working to restore the quality of the water they depend on from the San Antonio River, the Nejapa Aquifer and the Jiboa River. Through a project of the Sínodo Luterano Salvadoreño (Salvadoran Lutheran Church), the families have joined together to decontaminate the water from the tributaries to the rivers so that it will be safe to use for drinking, bathing and farming.

Miguel Angel Calderón Barahona is president of the La Granja Communal Association, one of the community groups working on the project. For Miguel, the project has meant more than just improving the water. "My life changed from the moment I decided to be part of this project," he says. As a leader, "I have had the opportunity to reach beyond my perspectives as a member of the community [and to] reach out to other communities, see the needs in those communities and be able to be part of [their] development, as well."

Part of the success of the program has been the ability to organize the people in the communities. That work began with an effort to improve the road to San Salvador, a route beset by fatal accidents. In working to improve the safety of the road, the community laid the groundwork and built the relationships that will now help them ensure access to quality water. Through the current project, Miguel says, the community has organized itself even more strongly, and now "the community at large is going to take a different course, and hopefully, it will be the path of success in our community."

Reaching their goal has meant doing the hard work of preparation: petitioning communities and schools, building relationships and forging partnerships. The "path of success" is laid by the many small steps the communities take now that will lead to big changes.

We, as church together, know this. What is more, we know that even as we yearn for the day when all will be able to partake in

the fruits of God's good creation, God is at work now, through the efforts of people such as Miguel and his neighbors in Nejapa, El Salvador and other communities working for access to clean water around the world.

Preparing for the day to come means more than hoping for the final fulfillment of God's promise. It means seeing, even now, that God is at work among us, and joining in this work. While we anticipate the event, we are not alone. In fact, we have never been alone, even this year. As we physically isolated from one another, God never isolated from us, as was evident in the many creative and courageous ways ministries adapted to ensure that the work of the church would go on – and that all would be prepared for the day to come.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) Where have you found God at work through the ministries of your church this year?
- 2) How is working to ensure that all have clean water, sufficient food and resources to meet their other needs part of the church's "active anticipation" of God's promises for the future?
- 3) What is a "path of success" for your community? How is the church helping walk with neighbors on that path?

PRAYER

Ever-present God, through sickness, violence, discord and injustice we have yearned for the fulfillment of your promise. Make us, your church, a sign of the day to come, that we may reflect this hope to others. Knit us together with one another and with our neighbors, that none may feel alone or isolated from your life-giving love. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

WEEK 3

"COMFORT"

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Volunteering has always been the lifeblood of Cacilda Rodrigues Barcelos. Born in São Borja, Brazil, she moved at age 13 with her family to the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre. Alone, her mother raised 11 daughters and sons, until her 50th birthday, when she died. Cacilda was 22 at the time, and the community helped to support her. "People taught me how to do what I do, because I was welcomed by them," she says.

Now 63, Cacilda has dedicated years to giving back through volunteering. Early on, she worked with young boys in the community to make and sell food at fairs to help pay for uniforms and tournaments for their soccer team. Today, as a member of the management board of the Fair Trade and Solidarity Network (a project of the diakonia foundation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil), she helps train other women in entrepreneurship and helps plan workshops and fairs where they sell their goods. She also volunteers in the Peace Service and teaches women to prevent and overcome violence.

As much as Cacilda has changed her community, the biggest change has been in her personal life. "I learned to put myself in other people's shoes and respect each other. I was very angry, as a way to defend myself, and it was in these meetings and meetings [with other women from the Fair Trade and Solidarity Network] that I grew and improved," she says. "That's why I say I'm the one who gains the most."

As common – and often justified – as anger is, it is one of those

emotions that we struggle to deal with in the church, at times. We might find it difficult to place raw, tumultuous emotions within the life of the people of God. Perhaps it is one of the reasons that this season we will sing songs about the “holy infant so tender and mild” (“Silent Night”) or “that mother mild” (“Once in Royal David’s City”) while we still await the writing of an ode to Jesus’ overturning of tables in the temple. Volatile emotions, particularly in the seasons of Advent and Christmas, feel so out of place. We aren’t quite sure what to do with them.

That has made 2020 particularly hard to navigate. This year, we have lived with the grief of the hundreds of thousands of lives lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have mourned isolation from one another and the loss of that most basic human need of touch, even as we understood the risk that accompanied handshakes and hugs. We grieved together as loved ones and neighbors died alone in hospitals or nursing homes. And when we couldn’t gather together for funerals, we lost a key ritual for processing our grief as a community.

We grieved the loss of livelihoods and the closure of family businesses that had been part of our communities for generations. We feared the long-term consequences for our communities as jobs were lost and more and more people around the world went hungry.

And we were angered together by the deadly injustice of racism and the persistent inequalities that exacerbated the pandemic in many communities. Demonstrations filled streets in cities large and small as a collective voice of rage was raised against a racist justice system that continues to disproportionately permit and even sanction extrajudicial killings of people of color.

Certainly, our hope rests in that just peace (*shalom*) that “surpasses all human understanding,” which will “wipe away every tear from our eyes” and bring such equity and harmony that the lion will lie down with the lamb and the child will play with the viper and not be harmed. But there are times when it is difficult to see this promise through the lens of overwhelming grief and righteous anger. And there are times when grief and anger are what we need to move us toward justice, which is the form love of neighbor takes in society. For many of us, 2020 was one of those times.

The promise of Advent is not merely the promise of a future when

all shall be made well, when all grief and anger shall cease and when the weight of heavy emotions shall be lifted from our shoulders. The promise of Advent – or, perhaps, the comfort of Advent – is that, amid our grief and anger, God is present, walking with us, consoling us, inspiring us and prodding us to walk together toward the future where justice and peace will kiss (Psalm 85:10).

The future day promised by Isaiah in this week's reading is a promise not to those who are comfortable but to those who are afflicted. In "the year of the Lord's favor," God will "provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning" (Isaiah 61:2-3). It is a promise that those whose burdens have left them with a "faint spirit" will be given the strength of "oaks" and that God will "cause righteousness and praise to spring up" like the first plants of spring (61:11). It is a promise that God, who "loves justice," (61:8) will establish the same – and an invitation for us to be part of this.

Perhaps that is the reassurance of the Scripture readings for this week. The grief and anger that have marked so much of this year – and that mark so much of every year for many of us living in vulnerability to disease, injustice, hunger and violence – is where God meets us. We need not gather the strength to move on nor ignore the depth of our pain in order to find God. God finds us in these depths.

Cacilda, working tirelessly with neighbors in Brazil, was able to let go of her anger and felt herself changed by the experience. But God did not wait for that moment to work transformation and renewal through her. Indeed, it may be through this very tumult that God moves us toward greater actions of justice. Christ did not wait for a comfortable bed but was born in the sharp, chafing, ill-fitting manger, amid the noise of the animals and the loneliness of the stable. We need not wait to be comfortable, for our grief to resolve or our anger to subside, in order to draw close to God.

God has been there all along.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) What caused you to mourn or angered you this year?
- 2) How does God meet you amid your grief and anger?
- 3) How can the transformation of our grief or anger help spur us to deeper acts in service of one another or in service of God?
- 4) What would a just peace (*shalom*) look like in your community?
In the United States?

PRAYER

Comforting and empowering God, you meet us amid our pain and ease the load of our burdens. Be near us in our grief and anger, comfort us as we mourn and move our will toward acts of justice for one another. Grant the world just peace this season, that we may find rest and hope in you. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

WEEK 4

PRESENCE

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:46b-55

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

How long was it, friends? How long did it take for you to sit at the table of communion again? Or, how long has it been? How many Sundays did worship mean gathering around a screen at home, instead of in church with your congregation? Do you yet feel safe to sit in a pew?

The church building, whether a simple storefront, an elaborate cathedral or a side-room chapel, is a place of welcome and rest for many. It is a place to gather and to greet, to talk and to listen, to console and to be consoled. It is a place to share laughter and tears and a place that reminds us of the communion of saints to which we are linked by baptism.

But this year saw those places of refuge turned into places of risk, hot spots for viral transmission. And so, we turned back home. Worship leaders fast-tracked their technical capabilities to provide online worship experiences. Confirmations, first communions, baptisms and other important rituals were either put on hold or radically transformed as we navigated the new normal of life in a pandemic.

It's no wonder that, by summer, so many of us were longing to be back together again. Even still, we were reminded continually that worship never ceased. As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton told viewers on CNN, "The church has never been closed. ... We've continued all of our work."

God's message for Nathan in the reading from II Samuel for this

week is poignant for our times and fitting with the message of the previous weeks this Advent. King David has ascended to the throne of Israel, battle-weary from struggles against the House of Saul and the Philistines. The Ark of the Covenant has been temporarily sheltered for safety in a tent outside the palace. Peace has come, and David reflects to his advisor, the prophet Nathan, that God ought not to stay in a tent while David lives in “a house of cedar.” His plan is to rebuild the temple and move the ark to a more permanent dwelling place.

David's desire is perhaps understandable. We long for the permanence and stability of our life together as church. We yearn for the familiarity of the church building and the respite it can seem to provide from the turmoil of the outside world. David's desire to build a lasting edifice for God to dwell in is well-intentioned and, quite honestly, human in its expression of both the need for stability and the desire to honor God in a “suitable” way.

But God's response through Nathan is far from sympathetic. “Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” God asks rhetorically (7:5). “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day... I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went” (7:5-6, 8).

And I have been with you wherever you went.

In the end, the message to David is God's message to us. Through a pandemic, through violence, through unrest, through injustice, through worship at home, through joblessness and worry, through hunger, through grief, through storms and disaster — *“I have been with you wherever you went.”* The great hope and comfort of Advent is that God has drawn near to humanity in love. In the end, we can dare to say that it mattered little where we worshiped this year — or, in some cases, how much we struggled to worship this year — because a promise has been given to us: *“I have been with you wherever you went.”*

Our challenges will not magically go away in 2021. The vulnerability to COVID-19 many of us felt this year was a taste of the ongoing vulnerability many of our neighbors face daily from threats to their health and well-being. The economic risks of lost

jobs and shuttered businesses are risks that are ever-present for many of our communities. And death-dealing racial injustice continues to be a present reality, not just in the cases that have made the national news but in so many other ways.

But we know that steps can be – and have been – taken to face each of these challenges. And we know that we need not take these steps alone. God is not sequestered in a “house of cedar” but “moving about in a tent and a tabernacle” alongside us, leading, guiding and inspiring us. Our call as church this Advent is to reflect this constant companionship within our communities, to all who feel abandoned or alone. *“I have been with you wherever you went,”* God assures us. May our prayer in the coming year be that the church might be able to say the same to all our neighbors in need as we work for peace, justice and a world where all are fed: *I have been with you wherever you went.*

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1) How has God been present with you and your church this year?
- 2) In what ways is the church present with neighbors in your community?
- 3) What difference does it make for you, your family, the church and the world that God has “been with us wherever we went”?
- 4) Where is the church not yet present?
- 5) Where is God calling you and/or your church to go, outside your “house of cedar”?

PRAYER

Loving God, you sustain us with your presence in our deepest times of need. We give thanks for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, and for the assurance of your presence wherever we may go. Grant your church humility, strength, courage and creativity to walk together with our neighbors in every community. May your church be a sign of your presence and promise in the year to come. And may your church bear witness to the signs of your presence among us. In your gracious name, we pray. Amen.

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