

Advent, Day 1—December 1, 2024

Word

Happy Advent, everyone! Advent is a season full of meaning and power. It takes us back and points us forward. It reminds us of what was and orients us to what is to come. It pulls us gently towards Christmas and thus fills us with memories and smells and music and anticipation. It calls us to pay attention to the real story of the coming of Christ—to the context of Palestine under brutal occupation and oppression. It calls us to focus on the realities of those who are suffering most in the world today—again Palestinians under brutal occupation and oppression. It calls us to reflection. It calls us to action. It calls us to consider what it would mean for Christ to come into the world today. It calls us to *fully expect* Christ to come into the world today. Oh yes, it is a season full of meaning and power indeed! And all of that meaning and power comes from the same place: God's Word.

We often think about and refer to the scriptures as God's Word, and so God's Word gives us the stories of our faith, the stories that enliven our sacred imaginations and inspire us to act in the world today. They are the stories that tell us the nature and path of God's promise to us and to all creation. The promise to give us life and to love us through life and to give us life again. And that promise is another meaning that we can apply to God's Word, in the sense that God has given us God's word, and God will keep that word! Oh yes, and then, of course, we have the Word made flesh! As we so lovingly repeated in our call to worship, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Hallelujah! This is the meaning of it all. This is what we celebrate in Advent and Christmas. God's Word tells us the story of the promise, of God's word being kept, through the incarnation, God's Word becoming flesh.

This year, each Advent reflection will focus on a different word that carries meaning and power. You are most welcome to tune in if it brings life to you during this season of reflection and expectation!

Advent, Day 2—December 2, 2024

Hope

Yesterday we lit the candle for hope on our Advent wreath during Sunday worship. Starting Advent in this way always helps me to get into the right frame of mind and heart. For, at its heart, Advent is the season of hope. It calls us to step into the sandals of those long ago who had hope for a messiah in the midst of brutal realities. It calls us to carry the light of hope in the midst of realities today that often seem impossible to overcome. For us Christians, that hope includes the possibility of the messiah coming back to heal all things. And so we have the hope that comes from celebrating and

reflecting upon all that it meant for the world for the Word to have become flesh in the body of an infant in Palestine long ago. We have the hope that comes from looking at the life he lived and the way of transforming the world that he embodied—heart by heart as well as wholesale revolution. We have the hope that comes from God’s word that this remarkable person will come back in the clouds, ushering in a new heaven and a new earth. Hallelujah!

I often hear hope being challenged as a counterproductive concept—something that puts people’s minds on an unrealized future without addressing the problems of the present. I can understand this critique if hope is thought of merely as passively waiting around. True hope is an active force, though. If we have hope, then we engage the world in transformative ways. If we have hope, then we work to bring the desired future into the present. If we have hope, then that candle flame becomes a fire of inspiration and motivation blazing within us!

I understand that hope may not always be accessible for those who are suffering the most right now, for those whose light of hope the powerful have sought to extinguish. And so, we must bear that torch for others when we have it, doing the work to create a world in which all can shine bright with hope. So let us keep our eyes lifted up to the clouds while our hearts, hands, feet, and brains do the work of transformation! “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”—Romans 5:5

Advent, Day 3—December 3, 2024

Expect

I often describe Advent as a time of *expectant hope*. There may be some redundancy there, but I tie the two words together to add some solidity to that flame of hope. Perhaps we can think of it as iron in the fire. To expect something takes matters a step further, indicating that there is foreknowledge or evidence that something will or should happen. There is strong reason to believe that something will come to pass. During Advent, we should be looking at the evidence to see whether or not God’s word is being kept. If it is, then we should expect continued fulfillment of God’s promise to love us through this life and to give us new life. We should expect the incarnation of the Word to come again, and perhaps again and again! That evidence could take many forms—the miracle of physical existence, the miracle of interpersonal love, the miracle of emotional healing, the miracle of natural beauty, and the miracle of _____ (you fill in the blank).

It resonates during this season in particular that *expecting* is used to describe the phenomenon of being pregnant. Thousands of years ago, Mary was expecting a baby, and she was expecting that baby to be the messiah who would transform the world. That expectation is apparent in the prophecy of the Magnificat. She *knew* deep within herself what would come to pass, and with that knowledge she nurtured her child into the ways of transformation. She helped to make her expectation reality. This year, may

we expect new creation and the transformation of this devastated world. May we do so with the evidence of God's word-keeping. May we do so with prophetic power. May we do the work of nurturing children into the ways of transformation. May we make sure that children are free to live in the first place, safe from genocide and war and guns and detention. May we proceed with the knowledge that God expects our participation in making all things new!

"And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'" — Revelation 21:5

Advent, Day 4—December 4, 2024

Wait

I have tried mightily to make the case that Advent is not a season of passively biding time until something happens. It is a time of active hope and active expectation, of working to make the desired future come to fruition. And yet, waiting is a big part of it all. We don't have the power to speed up time so that Christmas gets here sooner, and we don't have the power to make Christ come back in the clouds. That means we have to wait.

Waiting is a very hard activity for many of us! It requires patience, and I know that patience is not the most common fruit of the Spirit. It is certainly a fruit that can grow if nurtured with intentionality, though! Just as we practice it with our loved ones, we can practice it with God. We may get frustrated with God's timing (just like we get frustrated when waiting for our loved ones to get ready to go out the door or to show up for an event), but God's timing is always going to be the right timing. Waiting invites us to sit with God's timing. Waiting invites us to pause and reflect on why God might be working according to a particular perspective and timeline. Waiting invites us to talk to God about it. Waiting invites us to be present in the moment and to breathe. Perhaps we can implement all of that when waiting for fellow human beings as well! I think we might all be the better for it!

"But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."—Micah 7:7

Advent, Day 5—December 5, 2024

Imagine

I remember my loved ones in Zambia often saying, "Imagine!" as a very particular exclamation. It seemed to be a mixture of, "Picture it!" and, "Can you believe it?!" with an air of incredulity. The exact vocal inflection has stuck with me over the years, and any time I hear the word, "Imagine," it rings in the ears of my mind. I really like that way of using the word. Picture it! Can you believe it?! It carries the traditional meaning of visualizing something, of creating an image, and it adds the question of belief or disbelief with a bit of absurdity implied.

As we hope, expect, and wait this season, we should be using our sacred imaginations.

We should let them run wild, all the way up to that line of absurdity. For, God works in ways that are beyond our wildest imaginings. God challenges the limits of what we see as possible. Let's implement imagination as a spiritual practice. Let's imagine what it was like thousands of years ago when a teenager gave birth to a child in a stable. Let's imagine what it will be like when the messiah returns. Let's imagine the new heaven and the new earth. Let's imagine how we will relate to each other. Let's imagine how the Word made flesh will inspire us to be. For, imagination is itself an act of creation. That which seems impossible could become reality.
"Imagine!"

Advent, Day 6—December 6, 2024

Prophesy

Yes, prophesy with an "s!" I know that word is a struggle for English-reading liturgists the world over, as brains and tongues tend to see prophecy with a "c." The words, of course, are intimately connected. The distinction in how they function (and are pronounced!), though, is significant. "Prophesy" is the verb. "Prophecy" is the noun. Prophesying is the action of the prophets. To prophesy is to speak truth to power. To prophesy is to speak about the future. To prophesy is to begin the process of creating that future by speaking it into being.

Advent is the season of prophesying. It is for good reason that we focus so much on the prophets of old in our scripture readings. They were the ones who called *out* the leaders and called *on* the people to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. However simple that call may sound, it was truly revolutionary given how far the people had fallen away from the way of eradicating poverty, welcoming immigrants, and meeting the needs of orphans and widows. Clearly and sadly, this is still a revolutionary call in our world today—particularly in the United States today. The prophets of old were also the ones who spoke the words calling for future salvation from the devastation of their world, particularly in the form of a messiah. With their words they put concrete form to what they were imagining, and so they began the process of making real what was imagined.

Prophesying is usually understood as God speaking through people. That is certainly true in a profound way. The Holy Spirit moves through the prophets, and the prophets share the message of God with the people. That is not the whole picture, though. The prophets also speak *to* God. They call upon God to fulfill God's word. In this, I wonder if prophesying also inspires God. I wonder if God responds to the imaginations of the prophets to help determine the shape of the future. After all, God is in full relationship with us, and relationships necessitate communication and mutual action. Wow! How powerful is that?!

So let's prophesy, loved ones! In the midst of this devastated world, let's put words and form to our imaginations of what could be, of what should be. The prophets of old demanded that the people transform their hearts and their actions. The prophets of old called forth a messiah who would transform the world. May we, also, call forth

transformation!

“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’” —Ezekiel 7:9

Advent, Day 7—December 7, 2024

Watch

Throughout this first week of Advent, we have taken a look at God’s Word and then at various ways to look, speak, and act forward—hope, expect, wait, imagine, and prophesy. These future-focused actions are contemplative and reflective acts of the mind and soul. They are steps on a journey to a destination of concrete manifestation of God’s Word, of God’s promise. And so, we should watch for that manifestation, that incarnation.

We should watch for the miracles of God’s presence with us, Immanuel, in our everyday lives. We should watch for life breaking through in contexts overwhelmed by death. We should watch for prophets of peace daring to disrupt violence. We should watch for children defying the evils that we adults have created. We should watch for hardened hearts softening. We should watch for bold acts of kindness. We should watch for immigrants being welcomed with love. We should watch for the building of intergenerational communities. We should watch for Creation care. We should watch, and we should do. For, all these are acts of Incarnation. And so, all these are acts of preparation for the coming of the Lord, the Word! For what else shall we watch?

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” —Matthew 24:42
