

Hope



Discerning God's *kairos* in the midst of our daily *chronos*

ADVENT DEVOTIONS – WEEK 1
NOVEMBER 29–DECEMBER 5, 2020

by Jill Duffield,
Presbyterian Outlook editor

SUNDAY | TIMOTHY 4:6-10

We use the word hope frequently, perhaps even flippantly. We hope not to get stuck in traffic or to get tickets to the game. The word hope gets thrown around and employed for wishes or desires. But the hope of Advent, the hope of our faith, goes much deeper than our likes and wants. The hope of Christianity entails nothing less than the redemption of the world — and this hope, while often difficult to maintain in the face of evil, is nonetheless certain. Paul instructs Timothy, his young apprentice in the faith, to train in godliness and focus on that which is true and worthy of full acceptance. He reminds Timothy, “For to this end we toil and strive because we have set our hope on the living God who is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe.” Our hope encompasses all of creation. Imagine that scale of expectation.

Our hope in this world of pandemic and war, poverty and disease, is set on the living God, the Savior of all people, who soon will become incarnate and dwell among us, who promises to return and set all things

right. As we begin this liturgical year and look to the end of the calendar year, we do not take hope lightly. The year 2020 does not afford us the luxury of cheap hope. Too much has been lost, altered or upended for us to hope for anything less than redemption, salvation and God for and with us. If we have learned nothing else this year, we have learned the limits of our own power. We cannot save ourselves. Our finitude cannot be denied. Our need for divine strength and intervention feels obvious this Advent. This year when we sing “Come, Lord, Jesus” from behind masks while we are physically distant from one another, I suspect we will do so with palpable longing, with a yearning hope to know without question that God is indeed with us.

As we eagerly anticipate the inbreaking of God’s kingdom this Advent, hearing Paul’s words to Timothy — that young disciple attempting to shepherd a nascent flock living in the middle of a threatening context — could guide and encourage us, too. Focus on godliness. Remember the teachings of Jesus, the commandments of God. Emulate those people of faith who are admirable, wise and stalwart. Think about the good doctrine learned from the Word of God and faithful people. Ignore irreverent and silly myths. Hope in no one less than Jesus Christ and nothing short of the salvation of all people.

Lord of all that is seen and unseen, we set our hope on you, our living God who comes to save, not condemn, the world. This year we feel battered and weary, ready for your inbreaking, longing for a sure awareness of your presence. We know you are true and worthy of full acceptance even on days we doubt your providence and wonder when you will set all things right. Help us to set our hope on you and live as people of hope who point to your light and enact your love in a world too often awash in hopelessness. Amen.

MONDAY | HEBREWS 11:1-3

Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. As you begin the Advent season and reflect on the year, what are your fervent hopes for yourself, your community, church and the world? Write those hopes down, envision them and pray about them. Can you be convicted and assured of their coming to fruition, even if you do not yet see them?

Gracious God, align our hopes with yours so that our dreams and visions participate in your good and certain future for all creation. Do not let our fear overtake our hope. Do not let us capitulate to lesser desires or false teachings. Grant us the faith to hope for nothing less than the redemption of the world that Jesus comes to bring. Give us the courage to participate in the new, good, life-giving thing, your near kingdom, present and coming. Amen.

TUESDAY | 1 PETER 1:13-16

Set your hope fully on grace. This, Scripture tells us is how we prepare our minds for action. Focus and anticipate and hope in grace — not efficiency or power or intelligence or even wisdom, but grace. Hope in grace runs counter to our culture obsessed with righteousness or winning, consumption or acquiring. What would it mean to set your hope fully on grace today?

Gracious God, grace seems like a risky bet given the state of our hearts and the state of our world. Won't those who hope in grace get exploited in the face of evil and sin? Besides, we take delight in seeing people get what we think should be coming to them. Help us to desire grace not only for ourselves, but for everyone. Show us again the unmatched, transformative power of your grace. Amen.

WEDNESDAY | ROMANS 8:18-24

The whole of creation groans together in the pains of childbirth. When we survey our world, where do we hear it groaning? Paul insists these groans lead not to death but to new life in Christ. This is the hope in which we are saved, for which we wait in patience. What difference does it make if today you reframe present suffering as birth pangs? What new life is God ushering into the world?

God of new life, you send your Son to usher in redemption. Nothing can separate us from your love. We confess that our waiting for suffering to end is not always marked by patience or hope. Despair creeps into our consciousness and we doubt that creation can survive, let alone thrive. Send your Spirit to intercede so that we might live in and act out of the hope of our faith. Amen.

THURSDAY | 1 CORINTHIANS 13:7,13

This most familiar of Bible passages reminds us of the intimate connection between hope and love. Love bears, believes, hopes and endures all things. The love of God made manifest in our human relationships tethers us together and binds us to one another in ways that will not be undone by life's myriad challenges. Consider those you love this day, those you are called to love, those you struggle to love. What are your hopes for them?

Loving God, you unite us in Christ. Such intimacy is not our doing and we cannot undo it. Nonetheless, we often test this oneness and fail to bear, believe, hope and endure in love. Knowing your unfailing love for us, we pray to exhibit a love that hopes all things even for those we find hard to love. May our stalwart love bear witness to your love for the world. Amen.

FRIDAY | JEREMIAH 29:10-14

God has plans for us, plans for our welfare and future. God promises to hear us when we call out and be found when we seek our Lord. When have you struggled to believe that God had plans — good plans — for you? Can you recall a time when you could not discern God's providence in the moment, but could see how God's good plans were evident in retrospect? Can this remembering give you hope for today?

God of our past, present and future, when present circumstances baffle and challenge us, test and upend us, we struggle to see your good plans and we worry about the future. We know you promise to hear us when we call. We know your word is trustworthy and true. When we cannot yet perceive your providence, sustain us and give us hope until that time when we see your good plans for us come to fruition. Amen.

SATURDAY | LUKE 24:21

This verse comes in the middle of the discourse between several of Jesus' bereft disciples and the risen Christ. They voice their dashed hope to the One walking with them who fulfilled it. They cannot yet see that their hope is not lost, but found and present right in front of them. How often is this true for us? Today prayerfully ask God for the vision to see God's fulfillment of promises right in front of you.

Lord of all that is seen and unseen, even when we hope for that which you promise, we often fail to see your present and coming kingdom despite the fact that you are walking alongside us. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the holy in our midst. Do not let our human expectations blind us to your divine inbreaking wherever and whenever it comes. Amen.

Wait



Discerning God's *kairos* in the midst of our daily *chronos*

ADVENT DEVOTIONS – WEEK 2
DECEMBER 6–12, 2020

by Jill Duffield,
Presbyterian Outlook editor

SUNDAY | PSALM 62

Wait. Wait in silence. Wait patiently. Wait in hope. Rarely, if ever, do we want the answer to be “wait.” Rarely do we wait without engaging in distractions to help the time pass. We stand in line and immediately, most of us look to our cell phones to read the headlines or check our email or play a game. We multitask. We toggle from one website to another. Waiting makes us anxious. Seeing buffering on the livestream causes irritation. An image of someone frozen on Zoom annoys us. Technology trains us to expect everything to happen instantly, seamlessly, until it doesn’t and then we get unduly angry. I always knew in my household the moment the internet went down because my teenage children would emerge from their room like whack-a-moles in an arcade game.

What is it about waiting that is so difficult for us? Did generations before us tolerate waiting better or is our impatience just more evident these days?

Of course, there are seasons of waiting that warrant our fear and unease. Waiting for a medical test result. Waiting for a loved one to come out of surgery. Waiting for a job offer to come when we are desperate for employment. Waiting for a family member to return safely from military deployment. Waiting for a storm to pass. We know this kind of anxious waiting, too.

But what are we waiting for this Advent and how do our Advent hopes meet our current fears and real worries? The psalmist writes: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from the Lord comes my salvation. God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.” This liturgical season is a pregnant kind of waiting — marked by expectation of new birth and new life that brings change, a transition that alters our priorities and schedules and reveals that some of what we have previously valued does not really matter anymore. We are waiting for God, not in vain, but in certain hope that with the birth of Jesus salvation for all creation comes and reorders our world and our lives. However, we may need to wait in silence in order to quiet our minds, discern God’s near presence, and trust that God is with us in all of our waiting, all of our worrying, all of our distractions, anxieties and fears.

Lord, you are our rock and our salvation, our refuge and strength, our hope and breath. As we wait with anticipation and anxiety, with patience and with eagerness, even with irritation and fear, silence in us any voice but yours. Grant us confidence in your promises to never abandon us and certainty in your power to bring light and life, love and grace, to all places and all people. Amen.

MONDAY | LUKE 2:22–26

Simeon represents those stalwart, faithful people who show up and serve week after week. Can you think of someone who fits this description? The dutifulness of these folks keep the congregation going through good times and challenging ones. They serve out of loyalty to God, not for accolades or attention. Today remember and give thanks for the Simeons whose waiting to see God is marked by consistent presence and service.

Lord, we give you thanks and praise this day for your faithful servants, those whose loyalty to you is visible in their service to Christ’s church and your beloved world. Sure of your Word, they keep theirs and show up daily, expecting to meet you face to face. Help us to do likewise, not only with a sense of duty, but with an anticipatory joy. Amen.

TUESDAY | PSALM 33:20-22

Our soul waits for the Lord. God is our help and our shield. We wait not for some unknown future or presence. We wait for the Lord. When have you waited specifically for someone or something? This sort of directed waiting shapes our hopes, expectations and behavior as we wait. If we are indeed waiting for our loving, saving Lord this Advent, what attitudes and actions will characterize our waiting? Today, notice the tenor and content of your waiting.

God you are our help and our shield. We wait knowing that our waiting will not last forever and that you will surely come with good news of great joy for all people. We wait with a hope that motivates us to sing your praise and tend your sheep. Our hearts are glad as we anticipate and experience now your steadfast love that endures forever. Amen.

WEDNESDAY | ISAIAH 8:16-17

Isaiah says to bind up the testimony and seal the teachings. God's people are believing conspiracies and fearing things other than the Lord. God says to the prophet to only fear and honor the Lord. Isaiah affirms that he will wait and hope for the Lord who seems to be hiding for a season. When you feel God is absent, how do you wait in hope for the Lord? Today, what is a source of hope in difficult waiting?

God of all times and places, when we feel as if you are hiding your face from us, our hope dims and our waiting seems endless. We give in to false teachings and let our fears run rampant. Send your Spirit to grant us hope even as we wait through difficult and painful seasons. Shine your light in the darkness, even if only for a moment, so that we remember your promise that joy comes in the morning. Amen.

THURSDAY | JUDE 17-22

Whenever there is a "but" in Scripture, pay special attention. The "but" represents a pivot that points to how disciples of Jesus Christ are to behave in the midst of challenging times. Here we read that Christians are to keep ourselves in the love of God as we wait for our Lord's mercy. What might it look like to keep ourselves in God's love today? This week? This month?

God of grace, while the headlines tell of turmoil and acrimony, we who follow Jesus Christ are told by your living word to keep ourselves in your love, to wait for our Lord's mercy and to be merciful to others. We know that your love is not theoretical but embodied and tangible. The mercy of Jesus Christ saves and transforms, perhaps especially during times of trial and pain. Make us instruments of this love and mercy, even now, especially now. Amen.

FRIDAY | LUKE 2:36-38

What do we do when we are waiting for something promised by God, but not yet visible or evident? Perhaps we are waiting for healing in a broken relationship or waiting to be able to forgive or be forgiven? Today we are told of Anna who waits for the redemption of Jerusalem and while she waits, she worships, fasts and prays. Is there a spiritual practice you might try that could keep you connected to God as you wait?

Lord, we want to see your promises come to fruition: promises of peace, justice and redemption. We do not want to grow weary or cynical, hopeless or defeated. We long for our priorities to reflect your character and our faith, even when we cannot yet see that for which we yearn. Ground us in prayer, find us in worship, be present with us as we fast and focus on you as we wait. Amen.

SATURDAY | MARK 15:42-47

It may seem odd to read an account of Jesus' death even as we prepare for his birth. And yet, there are times in our lives when our greatest fears are realized and it feels as if God is absent. Joseph of Arimathea was waiting for the kingdom of God, and despite Jesus' death he took courage and asked Pilate for Jesus' body. Where do you need to take courage and speak or act as you wait and look for God's kingdom?

God of grace and glory, sometimes we look for you and cannot find you. You tell us that if we knock, the door will be opened to us, and if we seek we will find. Yet, some days we pound on the door and it remains locked. Grant us courage, especially in those times and circumstances when our waiting for you feels as if it is in vain. Help us to do the next right thing in your name, despite our doubts and pain. Amen.

Watch



Discerning God's *kairos* in the midst of our daily *chronos*

ADVENT DEVOTIONS – WEEK 3

DECEMBER 13–19, 2020

by Jill Duffield,
Presbyterian Outlook editor

SUNDAY | LUKE 1:18–24

Often, we see that for which we are looking and fail to notice much of what is around us. A familiar route that we travel regularly becomes mere background and we arrive at our destination with no recollection of what we passed along the way. Details in the spaces we occupy fade from consciousness until someone unfamiliar with them points them out. One of my children has a gift for noticing patterns and anomalies. The building where my office is located is historic with a big staircase that I use instead of the rather aged elevator. After years of this ascending and descending these stairs, one day this child went to work with me and pointed out the discrepancy in the stairs' materials between one of the floors: the treads went from black to white. In all the many footfalls upon them, I'd never before seen the marked difference. Once she pointed this out, the contrast was absolutely obvious, and yet

I had missed it time and time again. It strikes me in this passage about Zechariah's angelic visitation that in his inability to speak and tell those waiting for him outside the temple what happened, they name that he has seen a vision. How did they know? Were they watching for such divine happenings? On the lookout for the holy?

We need others to help us see and interpret things, people and places we might otherwise miss. We need the community of faith to discern the work of the Spirit when we cannot articulate what is happening within and around us. The members of the Body of Christ possess different gifts, varying perspectives and points of view. When Zechariah could not speak, the people of God took notice and recognized that something extraordinary had taken place that day in the temple and named the truth that he had seen a vision. This Advent, are we paying attention and watching for the movement of the Spirit, for evidence of God's inbreaking and the angels' speaking? Often, we see that for which we are watching and miss much of what we do not expect to see. This is the season for noticing and naming the coming and present kingdom of God. This is the season for listening to those around us with eyes to see the holy that we may well walk past daily until they point it out and it becomes utterly obvious.

Lord of angels and visions, we often fail to see you at work and present in holy spaces and everyday places. We forget to be on the lookout for you and ignore your signs and instructions. When we get distracted, send your Spirit to arrest our attention. Remove the scales from our eyes that prevent us from paying attention to you. Grant us the ability to not only notice you, but act on your Word. Amen.

MONDAY | JOHN 6:1–3

A large crowd is following Jesus because they saw the signs he was doing, the miracles of healing he performed. Do we see signs of Jesus at work in our world? In our lives? What signs get your attention and cause you to follow Jesus even now? Today, pay attention to where you see Jesus' healing power and make note of it.

Loving God, we often fail to see signs of your healing, neglecting to anticipate your miracles, thinking instead that such divine transformation happened only long ago. As we go about our day today, we pray for an openness to your Spirit that reveals that you still intervene and bring wholeness in surprising and grace-filled ways. Amen.

TUESDAY | ACTS 20:28-32

Pay careful attention to yourself and to the flock with which you have been entrusted. Paul, as he prepares to leave these new disciples, admonishes them to attend to God's instructions and be alert, lest false teachers lead them astray. Given how much information and disinformation comes our way on a daily basis, how do we pay attention to God's commandments and discern what is counter to the will of God?

Jesus, you teach us the will of God and promise to send your Spirit to remind us of all you said and instructed. At times, we get overwhelmed with the relentless rush of headlines, billboards and voices clamoring for our attention. Silence in us any voice but yours, so that we might pay close attention to you and therefore close attention to our own thoughts and actions and close attention to the needs of the world you came to save. Amen.

WEDNESDAY | GENESIS 1:3-4

One of the refrains of Genesis 1 is: "And God saw that it was good." The light, the water, the land, the vegetations, all of creation — God saw it all and declared it good. Imagine if we surveyed all that we encountered and noticed — and saw that it was good. Today as you see the world you inhabit, make a point to notice its goodness and name it so.

Creator God, you make the world and call it good. As we wake and work, rest and play, open our eyes to the holy goodness all around and even within us. Do not let us take for granted the goodness of the meals we eat, the goodness of the people we encounter, the goodness of the air we breathe and the landscapes we move through every day. May we, like you, see and declare: It is good. Amen.

THURSDAY | HABAKKUK 1:1-5

The writer of Habakkuk calls God to account, wanting to know why God does not set things right, bring justice and vindicate the righteous. God answers in verse 5: Look and see; wonder and be astounded. God is at work in ways that human beings would not believe even if told directly. Can you relate to Habakkuk's frustration? Where is God telling you to look and see, wonder and be astounded at what God is doing right now?

Loving God, you hear our cries of frustration, our pleas for your intervention and tell us to look and see, wonder and be astounded at the work you are doing in the world. When we are unable to see your providence and power, remind us yet again to wonder, to have holy curiosity, to remember that the kingdom is near, and Jesus is surely coming. Amen.

FRIDAY | LUKE 12:13-21

Jesus warns us to be on guard and keep watch for all kinds of greediness. Jesus tells us to keep a lookout for our own propensity to believe that our life's worth is measured in material goods. When have you believed life consists of an abundance of possessions? Be conscious today of your relationship to money and possessions. How does that relationship reflect, or not, your relationship to Jesus Christ?

Jesus, you enter the world as an infant, born in a stable to a family with little in the way of material possessions. You tell your followers to take nothing for their journey. You warn us to be on guard for greed. As we prepare for your birth, we pray to be given the faith to put you first so that all our priorities are rightly ordered. Amen.

SATURDAY | ISAIAH 9:1-2

Deep darkness resonates this year. The word in Hebrew can be translated as "shadow" or "death-shadow." The people in this passage know the reality of fear and suffering — a nearness to death and vulnerability that feels familiar right now. As you navigate the waning days of a difficult season, where do you see God's light breaking into the deep darkness?

God of the light no darkness can overcome, we confess to being weary, tired of worries that keep us up at night and ready for your promised rest. When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, grant us the peace that passes understanding and the ability to see even a pinprick of your light that shows us a way forward. Amen.

Witness



Discerning God's *kairos* in the midst of our daily *chronos*

ADVENT DEVOTIONS – WEEK 3
DECEMBER 20–26, 2020

by Jill Duffield,
Presbyterian Outlook editor

SUNDAY | ACTS 1:6–10

Why read a passage about Jesus' ascension during the season of Advent when we prepare for his birth and return? What do Jesus' final instructions to his closest friends just prior to being lifted up to heaven have to do with us on the cusp of Christmas? What resonates in this passage at this time in this year is the disciples' pressing question. They want to know if now is the time that God will restore the kingdom of Israel. Their question is understandable. Having endured seeing their friend and Savior suffer and die, they want an assurance that all that pain results in restoration. In our human terms: they want to know it has all be worth it, leaving their familiar vocations, following Jesus, fearing for their lives, huddling behind locked doors, processing the good but utterly upending reality of resurrection. After all this, will the world be set right on their terms?

Do we not have similar questions at the end of this long year? Will the vaccine come soon and be safe?

Will we be able to be together in person again? Is now the time we can sing in worship? Will those long oppressed find justice? Will the economic fallout ebb and turn course? Is it not the time for the restoration of what we used to call normal, Lord?

Jesus tells the disciples that he does not know the answer to what is to them their most pressing question. Instead, he gives them a mission, an unwavering purpose no matter what is happening in the world. They are to be his witnesses right where they are and to the ends of the earth. I wonder if they were frustrated by his response. I wonder if we are, too. Often we want Jesus to answer our most pressing questions, but rather than answering our question Jesus gives us a job to do. We are to tell the world what we know of Jesus and what we know of God through him. Even as we make ready for his birth, we are to tell others why his incarnation matters to us and to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world.

As we continue to navigate a difficult time in the life of the world, we bear witness to the love of God that refuses to let us go. As we wrestle with challenges that persist despite our fatigue and dismay, we tell of the one found among the least of these. As we press God with understandable and pressing questions, Jesus recognizes our fears but entrusts us with the gospel anyway. As we get closer to Bethlehem, we remember that we are already and always witnesses to our Savior right where we are and wherever we are sent.

Gracious God, we have so many questions, urgent questions. We want to know when this time filled with so much upheaval will come to an end. Even as you honor our questions, you entrust us with your mission of bearing witness to Jesus Christ at all times and in all places. Open our mouths that we might proclaim your praise. Guide our actions that we might embody the good news of our Savior. Amen.

MONDAY | JOSHUA 24:19–24

Joshua asks the people to make a public declaration of faith, a commitment to serve God and God only. After they do so, Joshua reminds them that they are witnesses “against themselves.” They cannot claim ignorance or deny their affirmation of loyalty to God. When have you made a public commitment to serve God? How will you make that choice evident today?

Gracious God, you abound in steadfast love and yet you hold us accountable to the public witness we make to serve you. When we forget or neglect our affirmation of faith, call us back to you and correct our ways. May our witness against ourselves be a constant reminder that our ultimate loyalty is to you and that commitment is made visible in how we live. Amen.

TUESDAY | EXODUS 20:16

How often do we think about God's commandment to not bear false witness against a neighbor? What does it even mean to do so? Perhaps it would be helpful to put this in the affirmative: Tell the truth. Live with integrity even if it costs you something. We will inevitably violate this part of God's law as we do most others, nonetheless we are to aspire to tell the truth.

God of Truth, we often make excuses for our behavior, thinking that our violations of your law are small and even justified. As we prepare to welcome the Word incarnate, the true light coming into the world, help us to live with integrity, love our neighbors and bear honest witness to your goodness in all we say and do. Amen.

WEDNESDAY | 1 THESSALONIANS 2:9-12

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians that they, along with God, are witnesses to Paul's "holy and righteous and blameless" conduct toward them. How we treat others reflects our relationship to God. Our means and ends must match, our behavior commensurate with the gospel we share. Who have you witnessed being holy, righteous and blameless? What about the opposite?

As we draw near to Christ's birth, we wish to reflect the One we profess to follow. We pray, God of grace and glory, to be holy and righteous and blameless in our conduct toward others. When we fail to meet this standard, forgive us and send your Spirit to help us to do better and be a closer likeness of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

THURSDAY | HEBREWS 12:1-12

Christmas Eve

On this Christmas Eve we reflect on the journey to Bethlehem. It has been difficult and confusing at times. We have questioned if we would make it this far and even if God was with us along the way. As we prepare to meet Jesus face to face, we give thanks for the great cloud of witnesses that have guided us to his manger. For whom do you give thanks this year?

Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nations, we travel with your family to the stable in Bethlehem, eager to meet you, heavy with expectation, longing for rest as we prepare for your inbreaking. Surround us with that great cloud of witnesses that upholds and instructs us, inspires and spurs us on until that day when we are all gathered around your heavenly throne in worship. Amen.

FRIDAY | LUKE 24:44-49

Christmas Day

On this the day of Jesus' birth, we recall that in all times and in all places, he appointed witnesses to tell of his incarnation, his death and resurrection. We who welcome the infant Jesus proclaim the saving work of Christ. As we worship at the manger, prepare us, Lord God, to leave and tell the good news of great joy for all people. Amen.

Emmanuel, God with us, we rejoice at your birth, we offer you our gifts without reservation and we rest for a moment in thanksgiving and peace. As we prepare to be your witnesses, we seek to always live in hope and act courageously in faith knowing that there is nothing not taken up and redeemed through your incarnation. Glory to God in the highest! Jesus Christ is born this day! Amen.

SATURDAY | ISAIAH 44:6-8

In this Christmas season we witness to incarnation, the birth of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. As you reflect on this year with all its challenges and changes, where have you experienced the presence and power of God? How will you tell this good news to the world?

Emmanuel, as we worship and adore you, we praise God for the gift of your coming into the world. We see in your incarnation God's relentless love and refusal to give up on the goodness of creation. Make us your witnesses, ready to proclaim your truth, courageous in our discipleship, humble in our following, reflections of your light in this God's beloved world. Amen.