

Advent Devotional



CHRIST CENTRAL CHURCH

Advent Devotional

Advent is the time in our church calendar that we look back with gratitude and remember Christ's birth and mission of reconciliation while we also look forward with eager expectation and hope for when He returns again to bring His kingdom to completion for His children.

Advent is a season of waiting that begins four weeks before Christmas. During each of these four Sundays, we focus on a different aspect of Christ's character and read through scripture that either looks back at Christ's first coming or forward to His second coming.

Join us in this season of remembrance and anticipation, that is most certainly followed by celebration, with...

Weekly Advent Readings

We invite you to follow along with our weekly Advent readings and candle lightings at home. We have included scripture readings, prayers, and songs for each Sunday of Advent.

Devotional

The devotional is reprinted with permission by Danté Stewart.

Playlist

Enjoy the accompanying Spotify playlist at <https://tinyurl.com/CCCAdventPlaylist>.

Advent Readings

First Sunday of Advent:

Today is the lighting of the first candle of the Advent Wreath. This is the candle of HOPE. With Christians around the world, we use this light to help us prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Reading from Isaiah 9:2

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness - on them has light shone."

Prayer:

Lord as we look to the birth of Jesus, grant that the light of your love for us will help us to become lights in the lives of those around us. Prepare our hearts for the joy and gladness of your coming, for Jesus is our hope.
Amen

Hymns:

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Advent Readings

Second Sunday of Advent:

Today is the relighting of the candle of HOPE. We also light the candle of the second Sunday, this is the candle of PEACE. As we prepare for the coming of Jesus, we remember that Jesus is our hope and our peace.

Reading from Isaiah 9:6

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Reading from John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

Prayer:

Gracious God, grant that we may find peace as we prepare for our Lord’s birth. May divisions in us and in our families be peacefully resolved. May there be peace in our cities and in the countries of our world. Help us to see the paths of peace in our lives, and then give to us courage to follow them. Lord, let us remember that you only are the giver of lasting peace and that you are always with us. Amen.

Hymns:

Hark the Herald Angels Sing
It Came upon the Midnight Clear

Advent Readings

Third Sunday of Advent:

Today is the relighting of the first two candles. The candles of HOPE and PEACE. Now we light the third candle, the candle of JOY. As the coming of Jesus, our Savior, draws nearer, our joy builds with our anticipation of His birth.

Reading from Isaiah 65:18

“But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness.”

Reading from Galatians 5:22-25

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”

Prayer:

We joyfully praise you, O Lord, for the fulfillment of your promise of a Savior and what that means in our lives. Thank you for the gift of salvation through the birth of your son, Jesus. Create us anew as we wait, and help us to see your glory as you fill our lives with your living Spirit. Amen.

Hymns:

Angels We Have Heard on High
Go Tell It on the Mountain

Advent Readings

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Today is the relighting of the first three candles; HOPE, PEACE, and JOY. Now we light the fourth candle, the candle of LOVE. Jesus demonstrated self-giving love in his ministry as the Good Shepherd. Advent is a time for kindness, thinking of others, and sharing with others. It is a time to love as God loved us by giving us his most precious gift. As God is love, let us be love also.

Reading from Deuteronomy 10:17-19

“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

Reading from John 13:34-35

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Prayer:

Teach us to love, O Lord. May we always remember to put you first as we follow Christ's footsteps, that we may know your love and show it in our lives. As we prepare for our celebration of Jesus' birth, also fill our hearts with love for the world, that all may know your love and the one whom you have sent, your son, our Savior. Amen.

Hymns:

Joy to the World

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Prophecy Hope!

*An Advent Reflection on Hope, Peace, Love,
and Freedom*

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Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction: Hope Begins in the Dark

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.
— James Weldon Johnson

“Hope begins in the dark...”¹ I could never quite shake these words from Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*. This language of hope has recently become a theme in my life—not in the abstract sense, but as a living activity, a struggle, a commitment, a discipline. Whatever hope is, there is something deep within each of us that cries out in expectation. Sometimes it sounds like a whisper, but it is there. Yet, while hope springs from the depths of the soul, it often comes out of the shadows. Hope begins in chaos.

It is clear, as Luke Powery writes, that “we live in a fractured world.”² From personal predicaments to political problems, from economic challenges to environmental catastrophes, from spiritual struggles to societal suffering, hopelessness, restlessness, and confusion abounds.

At times it feels like we have never escaped from under that cloud that covered the face of the earth during the crucifixion of Jesus. We know that Sunday is coming, with a risen Jesus whose wounds bear witness to the extent of his loving passion; but for us, Saturday is here, and it’s still dark. As James Weldon Johnson so honestly puts it in the *Black National Anthem*: Stony the road we trod, bitter the chast’ning rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died.

¹Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1997).

²Powery, Luke A. *Rise up, Shepherd!: Advent Reflections on the Spirituals*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). pg. ix.

This is where we find ourselves in this season of Advent: living between doubt and discouragement, excitement and expectation. ‘Advent’ announces the ‘coming.’ We announce the coming of the Messiah in song; the season has begun.

We are putting up the decorations, buying presents, thinking about all the food ideas before us, and gathering together to celebrate and remember those who have gone on ahead of us. We are preparing for the Christmas arrival and the coming of the great Christ event. *The promise of the future hope that enters the present is upon us.* He is coming and he will come again.

We eagerly await that time when “Out from the gloomy past, Till now we stand at last, Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.” Yet there is pain. There is loss. And we wait. But while we wait, we must watch, we must work, we must worship.

In this season, in the midst of chaos and confusion, I invite you on a journey inside the black tradition. This tradition in America offers a rich legacy of faith that—like the crucifixion itself—exists at the intersection of chaos and pain and love. Deep in the souls of black folk was a hope that their cruel surroundings could not crush.

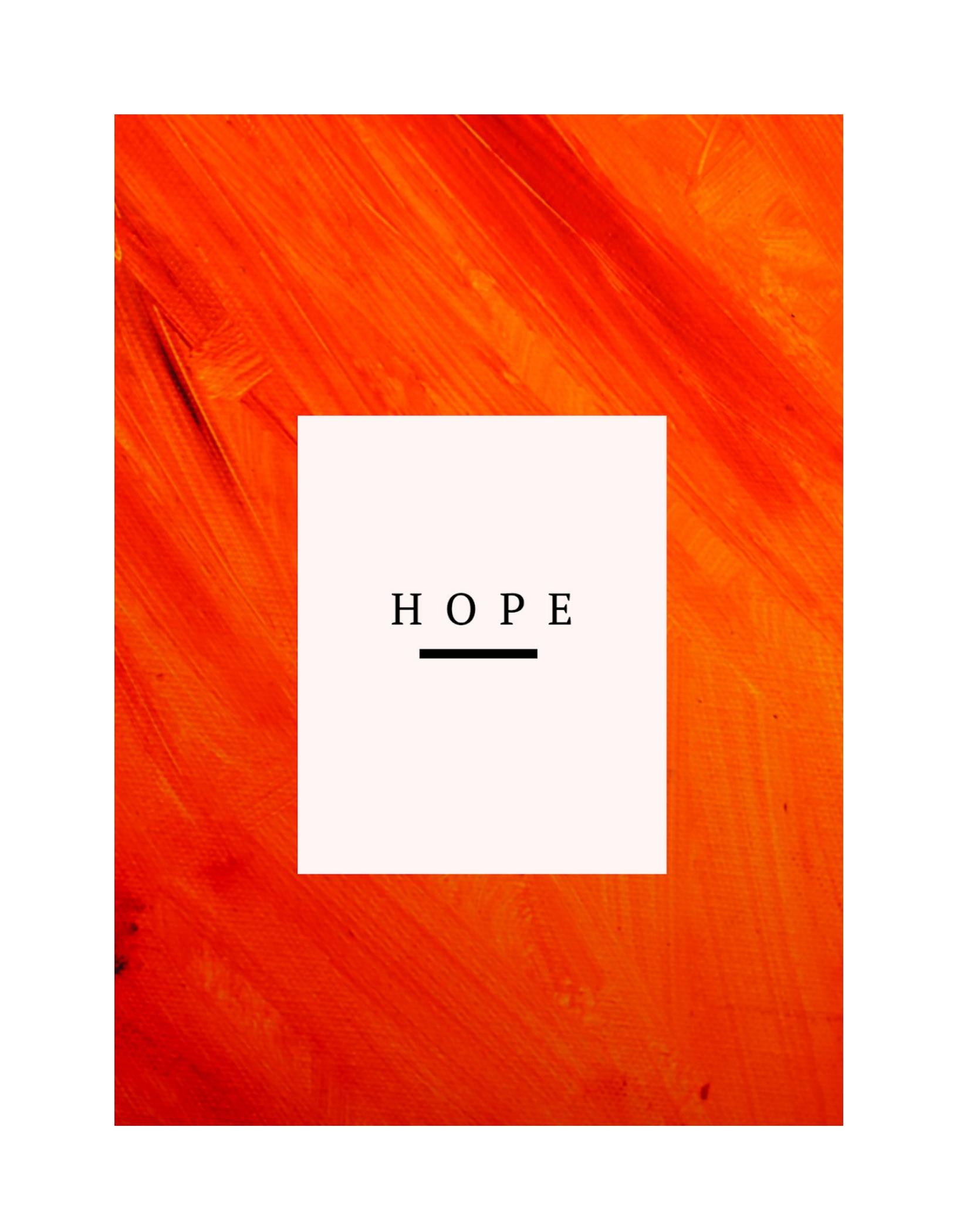
Though often overlooked, I believe we need this tradition. America needs this tradition. Not because it feels good or sounds good, but because we are still here, and we refuse to be silenced. These caged birds are still singing; giving voice to love, peace, and freedom; and still prophesying hope. In this season, as Powery notes, “it is crucial to learn from those marginalized voices in a liturgical season where hope is found in a humble baby Jesus born in poverty”.³

The journey is simple. Each week of Advent will cover one of four themes: hope, peace, love, and freedom. Each day will offer a quote, scripture, a brief reflection and question, and space for journaling. There will be a prayer to pray after each reflection and one small action to put into practice for the week. These reflections will invite us to a time of hope and renewal, recommitment and reflection, discussion and recentering. A time not only to welcome Christ’s arrival but also anticipate the coming reign of God.

Keeping hope alive is our greatest challenge, our greatest opportunity, and our greatest reward. May these words remind you of the things forgotten, awaken what

³ Ibid. xi

is dormant, energize that which is active, and give hope where hope seems lost.
“Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22).

The image features a vibrant orange background with a fine, wood-grain-like texture. In the center, there is a white square. Inside this square, the word "HOPE" is written in a black, serif, all-caps font. A thick black horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the word.

H O P E

Day 1

Zechariah 9:12

While We Wait: A Meditation

We can cry over loss, but not as if the loss is everything.

— Victor Anderson

Some time ago, my family and I took a trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. The moment was surreal. It was a much-anticipated trip for us; a type of spiritual sojourn. There is a difficulty in trying to explain why it was so meaningful. The names long forgotten were finally able to tell of their wounds, their burdens, their pain, their loss.

As we entered the elevator, it was as if we were transported back in time. The lower we went, the more solemn it became. We descended. The doors opened to our first stop: Africa and the Middle Passage. I began to walk in the exhibit, see the many souls long gone, and a weight came over me. I noticed something that I hadn't done in a while: I cried. We cried.

I have often reflected on that day. Those tears. Tears of our collective struggle. Tears of those who cry no more. Tears of those little babies torn from their homeland never to dance in the ring no more. Tears of the mothers and fathers jumping overboard to escape from Hell. Tears of the many bruised and abused bodies. Tears of broken promises and policies. Tears of our beautiful children lifeless in the streets and over social media. We wept.

It seems the first word of Advent for us is this: it's okay to cry. This season has a way of allowing us to pause and allow ourselves to feel. To hurt. To be honest. To be angry. To lament. To ask and to question. We can cry over loss, "but not as if the loss is everything."

Our tears tell two stories: one of hurt and one of hope. The tears we cried that day were not simply for the suffering endured, but also for the resilience and resistance of a people who had the audacity to survive. We are still here. So we return to our

stronghold; not in despair but as “prisoners of hope.” While we wait, we cry. Through tears we hope. Our tears tell us a story: Joy is coming in the morning.

Are you listening?

Questions

- What loss have you experienced this year that, in this season, God is inviting you to cry over?
- What story do your tears tell of the resilience you, your family, and community have displayed?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Day 2

Luke 1:67-73

The Quiet Anticipation

Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.

— Howard Thurman

In his beautiful reflection *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Kevin Quashie tells of a story etched in the American mind. It was the 1968 Olympics. During the medal ceremony two black male athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists in a public proclamation of Black Power. This salute was a “sign that protests racism and poverty, and counters the anthem and its embracing nationalism.”⁴ Little did they know it would cost them everything. It seems to be a recurring theme that America shows greater concern for black people protesting than it does the thing they’re protesting against.

As the image is etched in our mind as a loud statement of black resistance, Quashie invites us to look again. There is more. There are the bowed heads; “bowed as if in prayer.”

In this moment, there is a profound intimacy. This moment is “a reminder that this very public protest is also intimate.” The beauty of this moment showed that Smith and Carlos were “not only soldiers in a larger war against oppression but also two people in a moment of deep spirituality, in prayer.” What is compelling is the “unexpected glimpse we get of the inner dimensions of their public bravery.”

There is something about Advent that calls out to us to sit still, be brave; it calls us to quiet anticipation. But the call to the quiet is not reservation to the chaos or confusion of life. It is a call to radical trust, radical centering, radical faith in the

⁴ Quashie, Kevin. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. (New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers University Press, 2012) pg. 1.

midst of human darkness. It is a call to say with Zechariah, “Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.” Happy are we that the Lord has not forgotten us. Fear, hypocrisy, and hatred do not have the final word.

So we stand, expectant, preparing the way for the Lord. So we serve him without fear. We bow our heads in prayer. We limit our distractions. We raise our first in salute to the One who has promised freedom hope, peace, love, and freedom. We do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. In word and deed, we “spread the good news of God’s coming to make the world into God’s home.”⁵

Good news is our end. Thurman is right: how *good* it is to center down. There is Christ and courage to be found in the *quiet*.

Questions

- This week, how can you intentionally set aside time to visit Christ in the quiet places?
- What do you learn of good news and courage from this week’s scripture reading?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

⁵Volf, Miroslav, and Matthew Croasmun. *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* . Grand Rapids, MI : Brazos Press, 2019., pg 133.

Day 3

Nehemiah 5:6

Hope and Hashtags

A riot is the language of the unheard.

— Martin Luther King Jr.

I was recently listening to an advent reflection on a podcast, and it was stated that as one enters the liturgical seasons in the church, one must uncover the meaning behind the moment. He suggested that the season of Lent and Advent were connected; both are set aside as a time of reflection and preparation. Though similar, they are different. One is a time of reflection on God's love in the inner dimensions of our lives (Lent) and one is a time of reflection on God's love in the outer dimensions of our lives (Advent). The question pressed upon us is this: do we see God's love in the world?

On the one hand, we can say yes, of course. On the other hand, we must be honest and say that not everyone feels that way. There are those who are the "unloved." There are many who are harassed and helpless. They are in need of compassion where the Enemy and Death are constantly at work. I can't help but think of the many black children, women, and men in our country who have become hashtags.

In an essay entitled "Cries of the Unheard: State Violence, Black Bodies, and Martin Luther King's Black Power," Darrius Hills and Tommy Curry simply state, "they were murdered...all Black Americans...All dead at the hands of police."⁶ In response, #BlackLivesMatter became the theological and political "demand for Black personhood."

Howard Thurman was right when he declared that there is a striking similarity between the social position of the people of God awaiting the arrival of God's kingdom "and the vast majority of American negroes." There are policies and practices that make us feel unloved.

⁶Hills, Darrius D., and Tommy J. Curry. "Cries of the Unheard: State Violence, Black Bodies, and Martin Luther King's Black Power." *Journal of Africana Religions* 3 (November 4, 2015): 453–69.

Just like Nehemiah, we are “very angry when we hear their outcry and complaints.” We are angry; and like him, refuse to be silent.

To be angry means that we have to tell the truth of pain and even the pain of hope. For us, anger and hope are an unbreakable cord, one which holds the promise of truth and life together. We are angry, yet we are hopeful. We are hopeful, yet we are angry. Both have room to speak. If our anger didn’t have room to speak, it would turn to violence or acceptance of the illusion of freedom. If hope didn’t have room to speak, it meant only discouragement and despair, and no possibility of liberation and love.

So as we hang in the balance between hope and hashtags, or as some may call it the *already/not yet*, what is the Advent word for us today? God hears our cries. From slave ships to auction blocks, from hush harbors to hot fields, from Jim Crow to civil rights, from Black revolution to Black Lives Matter—God hears our cries. We don’t trust in our perseverance because we should never have to persevere this way. Instead, we trust in God’s power.

John Calvin was right: it is impossible for the judge of the world not to help the oppressed and afflicted when they are undeservedly mistreated, especially when they implore his assistance.⁷

One day it will end. Until then, we say their names and join Christ in the streets, working for a time when hashtags are no more.

Questions

- Who are those in your local community and in our nation who feel unloved that you and your church need to hear?
- Read Nehemiah 5:1-13. What do you learn about Nehemiah in his world and what do you learn about yourself and your world?

⁷ Calvin, John. *Calvin’s Commentaries Volume II: Exodus*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books). 66,67.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Day 4

Isaiah 59:14-21

Help is on the Way

At the cross, evil at its worst confronted holiness at its best, and love won victory over hate. Because of resurrection power, life has triumphed over death. A new age has come into being, God's new age. The climax of a struggle for justice and righteousness in history has occurred and the victory belongs to God.

— J. Deotis Roberts

One of the greatest challenges we face in life is the reality of waiting. Waiting has a way of frustrating even the most patient person. We are very familiar with this experience. Waiting on a table at a restaurant that we are very excited for. Waiting in line to check out. Waiting for the doors to open up on Black Friday. Waiting for presents on Christmas morning. Waiting for Fortnite or 2K to load. Waiting for someone who texted us “I’ll be there in 10 mins.”

The waiting is not simply personal; it is collective, encompassing all humanity—not just in the present, but through history as a whole. I can only imagine the waiting endured in those terrible nights of slavery as the enslaved tried to press their way into freedom. Or the waiting for those forced to see their humanity stripped as they encountered signs reading “WHITES ONLY.” The waiting that is caught up in the announcement of a verdict. The waiting for our pain, our predicament, and our people to be taken seriously.

Waiting.

Isaiah's prophecy, spoken to the people of God in exile, also speaks truth into our experience: justice turned back, righteousness standing a distance, truth stumbling in the public square."

Here we are in this Advent season, caught up in the memory of Christ's enter, exit, and reentry into the world, as Luke Powery writes, “it is true that perseverance and

patience are necessary.”⁸ Though we are aware that God has changed the world, and even changed us, it is very clear that we are living through life’s ups and downs. We are living in humanity’s “Upside Down.”

Hatred, fear, anxiety, hostility, oppression, violence, and self-centering are the characteristics of the day. We, all of us, are caught in the mutual state of human darkness, depravity, and separation; we fail to love our God, we fail to love God’s world, we fail to love our neighbor, we fail to love ourselves. We are sinners. We need intervention.

What good news is there for us? “He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene, so his own own brought him victory and his righteousness upheld him” (Isaiah 59:16).

As God-with-us, Christ came to intervene as God-with-love. Christ the Intervener is also Christ the Savior, Liberator, and Reconciler, who served humanity through alleviating “the plight of the poor, sick, oppressed, and those ridden by guilt and covered in shame for having failed to love God and neighbor; and he liberated those caught in the snares of power, wealth, and self-righteousness”.⁹

Advent always points us in a particular direction: God’s love for and in our world. Evil at its worst met Love at its best, and Christ has won the victory. As I heard the preacher say, “He was the answer before we even had a question, he was the solution before we even knew we had a problem.” Hope has come, and help is on the way. So we wait, we watch, we work, we worship.

The end is with God. And every step of the way: love, love, love.

Questions

- In what ways can you be honest and name darkness at work today, both in your personal life and in collective society?
- How have you seen God intervene in your life, the life of others, and our world?

⁸Powery, Luke A. *Rise up, Shepherd!: Advent Reflections on the Spirituals*, 13.

⁹Volf, Miroslav, and Matthew Croasmun. *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference*, 113.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Day 5

Luke 1:46-56

Go ‘Head and Sing, Mary

The black church has accepted its role in the liberation story of Africans in North America, but it has not claimed its Marian role as mother and witness to the working of God here on earth. As mother, its first call is not to church growth but to the birthing and nurturing of the Christ imaged in the least of us.

— Barbara Holmes

I come from a singing family—specifically, singing women. As a kid, I remember being in church and my mother leading the people to glory in song. There was one song in particular that I remember faintly. It was a rendition Romans 8: “Who Shall,” the choir sang, “Separate Me... from the love of God.”

In good Pentecostal fashion, our feet got happy.

There was something about song that told a story. Inside of song are the hopes, the dreams, the pain, the freedom of those bound. In her voice there is joy unspeakable, even but for a moment. Church was not the only place she sang. In the car. In the house. On the walks. She always had a song.

As I think of my mother, I think back on the mother of Jesus. Mary, too, had a song. I guess the older I get, the more I understand. Usually when you’re waiting on God to come through, sometimes the only strength you have is a hum, a tune, a reminder enfolded in the lyrics.

Lyrics. They don’t just sound good; they also tell us something good. They remind us of where we have come from, who we are, what God has done, and what God is doing. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

I have often thought of Mary and the many black mothers in our history who have been “favored” by God. They, like Mary, have had to witness the excitement of birth

and the pain of death as their precious children's life is taken from them. They have had to sing through pain. They have had to sing through tears. They have had to whisper a song. To prophesy hope, even if only through borrowed words.

Barbara Holmes, in her excellent book *Joy Unspeakable*, invites us to ponder mother Mary through the black woman's religious experience called Womanist Theology. There is much to learn from Mary through the eyes of these black women. They teach us something about the ethics of hope and waiting: the proper posture is praying and singing, birthing and nurturing Christ in us. They are a "witness to the working of God here on earth."¹⁰

He is bringing down the mighty from their thrones, he is filling the hungry with good things, in remembrance of mercy, he is helping. As a witness to the coming of the Lord, she teaches us to "stand silently at the places where the national powers are crucifying the innocent and waging war against the poor."¹¹ Her voice will cry out. In her song is truth to power. She is the mother of our freedom. We have seen her faith. She is blessed, forever pointing us to her baby boy.

If there is any prophetic song that God is speaking in this country, it is most surely bound to the voice of our mothers. They have testified in obscure places. We are here because they survived. Through their lives, they sing. Let us join them in chorus.

Questions

- What song has God been using lately to encourage you? Listen to that song and write what speaks deeply to you.
- What is one thing you can do this week to help nurture Christ in those around you?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,

¹⁰ Holmes, Barbara A. *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017). pg. 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Day 6

Isaiah 65:17,18

Stay Woke

Let me close by saying that we have difficult days ahead in the struggle for justice and peace, but I will not yield to a politic of despair. I'm going to maintain hope...With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

“Martin Luther King Jr. is dead.”¹²

These solemn words were uttered by King’s distant friend and spiritual mentor Howard Thurman as he eulogized over a San Francisco radio station on the evening of King’s assassination. The world was shaken. Riots were taking place across one hundred and ten cities. King’s murder was declared a national disaster. Stokely Carmichael, the civil rights leader who first used the slogan “black power,” went as far as to say, “When white America killed Dr. King, she declared war on us.”

As “pastor of the civil rights movement,” Thurman knew he needed to speak words of comfort and prophesy hope, but he felt there were no words that could possibly do justice to King’s life and legacy. Weighing on Thurman’s mind was the awareness that King’s assassination “reveals the cleft deep in the psyche of the American people.”

Just a month before, King’s voice could be heard preaching the gospel of freedom in his majestic sermon “Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution.” He stood at the dying heart of the nation because of its triple evils of racism, war, and poverty, trying to pump the blood of life, freedom, love, power, and justice into its veins. In a nation on the verge of spiritual death, the dream had become a nightmare. In Thurman’s estimation, King’s greatest contribution was in the way he lived Christianity in America. He embodied the revolutionary ethic of the religion of

¹²Thurman, Howard, Walter E. Fluker, and Catherine Tumber. *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). pg. 185.

Jesus. With this faith, he was “able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope.”

Yet, now, there was only silence. The thunder was no more. My father remembers that day vividly: “It was as if the earth shook and the world stood still.”

And since that terrible day, it seems as if the world is still shaking. If we take time to be still for a moment and gaze at the current events of the day, human tragedy is the theme. These are the “difficult days ahead” that King spoke of.

The question is: how does one keep going? King reminds us with the biblical call: sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead. The light has come into the world. Christ will shine upon you!

In other words: stay woke.

Staying woke is hard and holy work. It is so because, no matter what, we must try as best we can to hold on to the assurance of God’s promises and the presence of God’s power. For King, and for us, to staying woke means doing three things: seeing something, saying something, and showing something.

In the midst of brutal darkness, we must see a better day ahead. Not just any day. But the light of God’s new day, God’s new world, the God’s Great Revolution! “Behold I am making all things new.” Each day. When we wake up in the morning and our feet hit the floor, God has our name on the wake up list. God is not finished with us yet.

Like King, God must become real in our lives. The suffering our world should find love in our heart, hope in our lips, and freedom in our feet. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. We pray the Lord’s prayer and we act the Lord’s purpose. That is what it means to be the people of God in the season of Advent: people of light in a dark world, people of truth in the midst of illusion, people of hope in the midst of despair.

Stay woke, my brothers and sisters. Stay woke.

Questions

- How have you seen God become *real* in your life?
- What is it that you, your family, and community can see, say, and show this week?

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

Day 7

Psalm 24:7

When Life Got Your Head Down

"We ain't meant to survive, 'cause it's a set-up
And even though you're fed up, huh, you got to keep ya head up"
—Tupac

Not too long ago, I came across an interesting photo. It was entitled “Emergency Call Numbers” and listed Bible verses to “call” when you’re in trouble. What piqued my interest was the amount of times I found the Psalms on the call list. This should not surprise us. I heard it once said that if one wants to meet the wide range of human emotions and experience communicated honestly, just visit the psalms. In poetic fashion, the psalmists invite us to the heart of human life and therefore to the heart of God.

If one was to do a study on the Hebrew word for Psalms, *Tehillim*, they would find it can be translated “hallelujah” or “praise.” This seems to suggest that when we call on the Psalms, we will receive something to say hallelujah for and something to praise God about.

Often that doesn’t seem to be the case; especially in the holiday season, the season of cheer and excitement. One of the most common human experiences is the reality that life, in all its contradictions and creativity, often has our head down. We, at least, not on our own, are never quite strong enough to keep our heads lifted.

Just as with our experience today, so it would have been with those experiencing firsthand the events of Psalm 25. The people have stumbled upon the Temple. Some came under compulsion; some came through desire; but one thing is clear. No matter the motivation, they were all there together, in need of a collective word to get them through the season.

What is the word of hope today? “Lift up your heads.” As one of our own poets Tupac would say, “And even though you're fed up, huh, you got to keep ya head up.”

To prophesy hope, we must not just look up in general, but look to the One who is the “lifter of our heads” (Psalm 3:3). To lift our heads is not to gaze upon a day when all will be well in the by and by. No. It is a discipline; a commitment; a practice; a protest. It is to do so today energized by the hope of tomorrow. The relevant question for us today is when you lift up your head, where do you look?

You must look up to refocus your attention of God and recentering your spiritual, social, and moral grounding. All of us need recentering. There are specifics about yourself and God that you have forgotten and need to be reminded of. You must look within to see your own frailties but also your own possibilities. You must look around to see what God has done, is doing, and will do in you and others. You must look ahead to the promise of God’s power and purpose.

As Dwight Hopkins, speaking of our ancestors’ long journey to freedom, writes, “from the vantage point of chattel, we have seen how God embodies the Exodus, realizes justice for the marginalized, and bring God’s children into the Kingdom.”¹³ We may not know what tomorrow holds, but we know who held us yesterday and who holds our tomorrow.

“Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory.”

That is the hope of Advent. That is Good News. Lift up your head, look, and watch God work.

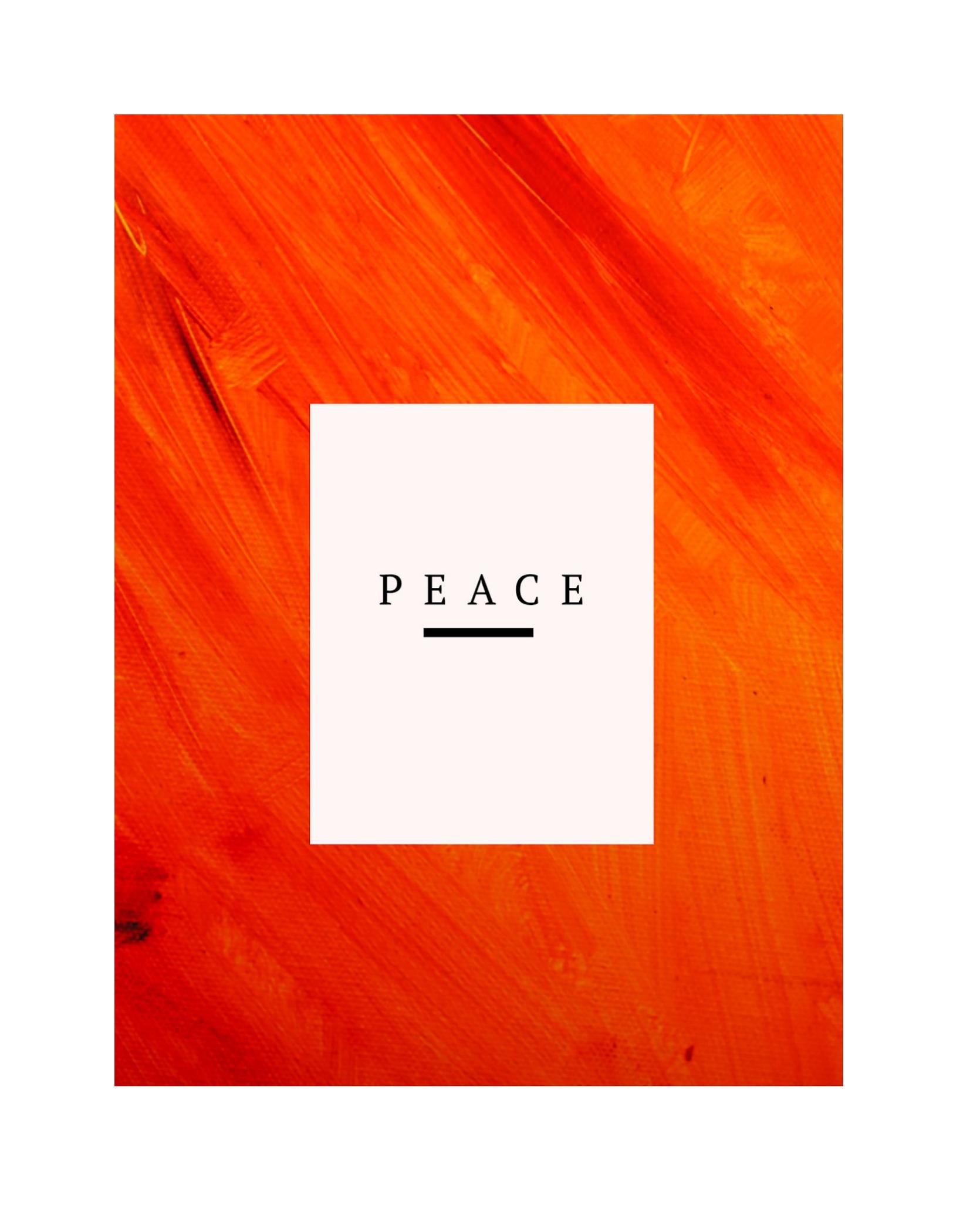
Questions

- How have you seen God lift up your head and the heads of those around you?
- In what small ways can you look up, look within, look around, and look ahead this week and encourage others to do the same?

¹³ West, Cornel, and Eddie S. Glaude. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). pg. 801.

Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.



P E A C E

Day 1

Amos 5:24

No Justice, No Peace: A Meditation

Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother's sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

— Ella Baker

“No Justice, No Peace.”

“No Justice, No Peace.”

“No Justice, No Peace.”

These were the cries of many of our young black people as they sought to give voice to the deep pain and disappointment that reverberated throughout the nation. Black blood cried out from the ground. Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. John Crawford. Shantel Davis. Philando Castille. Walter Scott. Hashtag after hashtag.

Looking back over the time, experience, and the making of a movement, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor simply asks, “Five years later, do black lives matter?” In the five years since Mike Brown, Jr., “was murdered and the streets of Ferguson, Missouri erupted, police across the United States have killed more than four thousand people, a quarter of them African American.”¹⁴

Many would like to believe that these deaths do matter; but if one is honest, it is quite clear that there is what Eddie Glaude calls the *value gap*.¹⁵ The structural principles, policies, and practices in America that make this a reality bear witness in our belief that black lives are less valuable than others.

¹⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. “Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?” Jacobin. Accessed November 9, 2019.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/black-lives-matter-laquan-mcdonald-mike-brown-eric-garner>.

¹⁵ Glaude, Eddie S. *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul*. (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2017).

As the body count arose, there was horror. “Black bodies bled in the street with such regularity,” writes Barabara Holmes, “that it took our collective breath away.”¹⁶ It seemed all the young people had were their bodies and their cries. Our bodies. Our cries.

This is exactly the sort of news that disrupts.

Much like the Black Lives Matter movement shakes us out of our illusions of the moral goodness of America and its “postracial” myth, Advent shakes us out of our illusion that all is right in the world. Advent has a way of pushing us back to the ancient people of God and their world to our world. It tells us false peace is not hope; false hope is not peace. Hope only comes through honesty. And honesty only comes through allowing the wounded of the world room to speak and allowing Christ the final say.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer once said that we must always ready ourselves to be interrupted by God. The season of Advent has a way of doing that. This season holds in tension the good news of divine deliverance but also the bad news of human darkness. It never quite lets us hold on to our triumphalism.

I guess this is why many black people resonate so deeply with our Jewish kin’s story in the Bible. Like them, we know what it means to come from a memory of enslavement and disenfranchisement. We know what it means for our young to be violently sought after because of imperial fear. Like them, we know what it means to have the powerful systematically push us to the dungeons of despair. Like them, we know that convincing others of our moral uprightness won’t save us. We know. Lord knows, we know.

But that’s not all we know.

We too know that the God of hope, as our own history tells us, is the God of the oppressed.

We know that God is our creator and sustainer. We know that God is a companion in our suffering, showing solidarity and compassion. We know that God saves us from hopelessness and worthlessness. We know that God is our comforter even in the time of trouble. We know that God’s sacrificial love in Christ is our healing, our

¹⁶ Holmes, Barbara A. *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 142.

help, and our hope. We know that God, our God, is our co-laborer, calling us to join him in creating a more loving and just alternative for all of us.

Because we know, like Ella Baker says, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”¹⁷

“No justice, no peace.”

“No justice, no peace.”

”No justice, no peace.”

Questions

- In what ways has God been interrupting you this year through the stories of others?
- What have you learned about yourself, your neighbor, and your God through these interruptions?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

¹⁷ Dillard, Nan. “Ella’s Song: ‘We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest Until It Comes.’” Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, December 12, 2013.
<https://ellabakercenter.org/blog/2013/12/ellas-song-we-who-believe-in-freedom-cannot-rest-until-it-comes>.

Day 2

Mark 10:13-16

Ordinary Resurrections

You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent. Good luck and God help the child.

— Toni Morrison

I absolutely love stories and storytelling. Maybe that's the writer in me looking for the next illustration. Or maybe it's the preacher in me looking for God in the illustration. As one writer said, everything is interesting.

Recently, as I put my son down for bed at night, we have been listening to the audiobook of the famous and interesting story of *James and the Giant Peach*. The story tells of his adventures into the world of the peach and back again. In this narration of his journey, there was one particular part I couldn't quite shake.

James, as he sat under the tree, was crying. One can only imagine the weight on the shoulders of this child as he was pushed into an environment not of his own choosing. He was emotionally vulnerable and blamed for his own situation. He simply sat there in a pool of tears, dreaming of all the wonderful things all other children of the world were doing. In that moment, all he had were his tears and his dreams.

As I held my son, my world changed and it hit me: for every Asa, there is a James somewhere dreaming of a more peaceful day. Our world and our children are marked by tears and dreams. There is trauma. There are inequitable circumstances. They are blamed. Many are forsaken.

Telling the story of children in New York in his book *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope*, Jonathan Kozol writes that many religious people would like to believe that our children are created in the image of God, deeply loved, and deserving of freedom and opportunity. We like to believe that it is so, but

sadly “in the eyes of those who exercise real power in New York, it is seemingly not.”¹⁸

This is not simply true in New York. It is also far too true of many of our precious black children all over. As Marian Wright Edelman simply asks, do our actions show that we believe our young, “each of whom 'comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man,' says Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, can become the healing agents of our national and world transformation and future spiritual and economic salvation?”¹⁹

I have wondered what Jesus would say to this. As I read Mark 10:13-16, it is clear: Jesus believes so. It seems that many of the adults in our world are acting like the disciples: responding sternly. I guess ours was not the only society to see our children as a burden to be disposed of and not a life to be love. Not so with Jesus. He simply says with resolute authority: let the children come to me. He points to the children as the expression of God’s home, the kingdom. Indeed, we must enter the life of God like them.

Don’t miss the powerful progression. He corrects our adult arrogance and societal degradation of our children. He positions us to learn of the children what it means to be a people of peace and love. He invites us to see that these, as Kozol says, are children of hope. He directs us to them as the site of *ordinary resurrections*. He embraces them. He encourages them. He empowers them. As Howard Thurman beautifully writes, he placed a crown upon their heads that they would “keep trying to grow tall enough to wear.”²⁰

God helped the child.

And through the Child, God wants to help us.

How?

Embrace. Encourage. Empower.

¹⁸ Kozol, Jonathan. *Ordinary Resurrections: Children in The Years of Hope*. (New York, NY: Broadway Paperbacks, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., 2012). pg. 46.

¹⁹ Marion Wright Edelman gave the 1997 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at University of California, San Francisco. Her talk was entitled “Standing for Children.”

²⁰ West, Cornel, and Eddie S. Glaude. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*., 59.

Somewhere, there is a child under a tree, crying, waiting for you. Somewhere there is a child looking for hope and peace.

Questions

- What have you learned of the kingdom of God from the young people around you?
- Who are the young people in your family, church, and community that you can embrace, encourage, and empower this week?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

Day 3

Mark 4:35-41

The Site of Memory

...the act of imagination is bound up with memory.
—Toni Morrison

Many have said that the season of Advent is a journey. It is a journey that follows the ancient people of God and their hopes and dreams of a God who is able to change their world. It follows the experience of enslavement and exile. It follows a period of silence and suspicion. It follows a series of promises made to of a hope unborn. It follows the anticipation, expectation, and the eventual coming of the Messiah to make all things new.

As hopes were dashed and dreams deferred at the crucifixion, resurrection, and the silence since the ascension of Jesus, it as if that all people had to hold onto was their memory. Maybe that is why memory is so powerful: it is the unbreakable cord that binds the pains of the past to the problems of the present and the possibilities of the future.

It can be said that our Christian hope is also bound with memory. But that is not all memory does.

Memory has a particular way of allowing us to ponder the actual and imagine the possible. Writing in her beautiful reflection *The Site of Memory*, Toni Morrison says that “the act of imagination is bound up with memory.”²¹ She recounts how the Mississippi River was straightened out to make room for houses and liveable conditions. From time to time, the river floods these particular places. Morrison stops and examines the word *flooding*. It is not flooding, she says, “it is remembering, remembering where it used to be.” All water “has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back where it was.”²²

²¹ Morrison, Toni. “The Site of Memory .” *morrison_memory*. Accessed November 28, 2019. https://public.wsu.edu/~hughesc/morrison_memory.htm.

²² *Ibid*.

In this way, she takes us back to the memory of black people's literary genius. Out of the imagination, they dreamed of a new world. They told a story of the dreams and hopes of those who are bound simply trying to get back to where they were. Through many toils and dark nights of the soul, a people dreamed of a better day of freedom—a kingdom of peace where the souls of black folk can be free. She remembers the story of Olaudah Equiano's adventure-packed narrative. She remembers Harriet Jacobs' story of quiet desperation. She remembers the political savvy of Frederick Douglass and the honest vulnerability of James Baldwin. All told stories of hope in the midst of despair, power in the midst of pain, love in the midst of brutality. And this rush of imagination, Morrison writes, "is our flooding."

But that's not all they tell. These stories of hope and possibilities also tell the story of the God of hope and possibilities. They tell of a God who wins victory over defeat, offers love in the midst of hate, freedom over bondage, redemption over destruction. This God is the one "who invited us to life with the risen Messiah Jesus, God's only child."²³ Only here, Willie Jennings writes, "can imagination be formed that desires the multitude as God desires them to be joined to the divine life forever."²⁴ They tell of a God who has come, is coming, and is already here.

So, while we, and the many ancestors before us, are crying out on the ship "Teacher do you not care that we are perishing," our imagination is invited to the heart of Jesus, who says "peace be still." In truth, whatever may be the tensions and the stresses of a particular day," Howard Thurman writes, "there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy or unremembered peace."²⁵

The question for us is this: have we visited the site of memory?

Questions

- What memory do you have of God's work in your life that you need to revisit today? Take a moment to pause, breathe, and reflect on that memory.
- How does this change the way you ponder the actual and imagine the possible?

²³ Jennings, Willie J. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). pg. 246.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁵ Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of The Heart*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999). pg. 211.

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

Day 4

Isaiah 9:6,7

In the Footsteps of Jesus, *the Prince of Peace*

True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force—justice, good will and brotherhood.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

Peace.

All our longings are represented in that one simple word. For us, it is not difficult to see the paradox of walking through Advent as we journey to the joyous Christmas day where all will be well. The reality is that it is a long and lonely journey, much like the one taken by the people of God. They traveled through the wilderness, simply following God into a place they did not know. The only thing they knew for sure is that they had a place, a promise, and a presence.

God's presence. God's voice.

But also there is silence. The silence of what it meant to wake up in the morning, steady yourself and your family, pray, and enter a world in which one lived in the mix of paradox.

As we have been making preparations in the holiday season, we have also been experiencing the difficulties that beset human life. It has a particular way of pushing us into paradox: On the one hand, there is the prospect of peace; on the other hand, there is the persistence of problems.

I often think of this paradox in J. Cole's poetic reflection entitled "Middle Child" as he tells of these trials and triumphs. There is young Kodak, young, gifted and black, trying to make it, but trying to do so in a given system of injustice and poverty. There is the joy of celebrating another year of life, but the joy is confined to the corridors of old metal because one sits in the lonely cell in prison. There is the

beauty of family, but the family tree's fruit produced is trauma and the need to heal. There are young sisters and brothers full of the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness; but there is also the poisoning of the well that leads to a distorted self image and dysfunctional relationships.

I guess our artists, or better yet our poetic geniuses, have a particular way of communicating our need: peace within and peace without.

I recently stumbled upon a story of the legendary boxer and activist Muhammad Ali. As the world was torn by war and strife, Ali travelled the globe in support of human rights efforts and those caught in conflict. Ali being no stranger to standing in solidarity with the sufferers of the world once again wrapped his hands and strapped on his gloves to enter the ring. This time instead of trying to win a match through landing the perfect punches, he was designated by the United Nations to win on the world stage through being the *Messenger of Peace*.

That is what we need. Better yet, that is *who* we need. We need someone who will disturb and interrupt the peace; false peace. A disturber of the false peace that says I'm good without God. A disturber of the false peace that says I'm good without acknowledging my brokenness. A disturber of the peace that says nations can rule through bombs and unjust policies.

That is who Jesus is, the Prince of Peace. He invites us out of our false peace into true peace: loving God, loving self, loving neighbor. He does not rule like the rulers of our day. He rules with justice and righteousness, mercy and grace, love and liberty, freedom and joy. To the weary and wounded, he says *come*. To the broken and bruised, he says *welcome home*. To those under the weight of oppression, he says *I will come down and rescue*. All who come, he sends to be agents of healing and wholeness.

Like J. Cole says, he makes sure "that real gon' prevail." And we do too. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Questions

- What false peace do you need to be honest about and lay at the feet of Jesus in this season?
- How can you make sure the real prevails by seeking real peace in yourself, your family, and community?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

Day 5

Jeremiah 6: 13, 14

These Lines: *In the Shadow of the Other America*

There is no evidence that black people are less responsible or less upstanding in their dealings with America nor with themselves. But there is overwhelming evidence that America is irresponsible, immoral, and unconscionable in its dealings with black people and with itself. Urging African Americans to become superhuman is great advice if you are concerned with creating extraordinary individuals. It is terrible advice if you are concerned with creating an equitable society.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates

I have often heard the old saying, “Give a man a fish, he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.” This particular saying has been used, and for good reason, to further encourage others to use their agency to act for their own destiny.

But I have always been struck by one question: what happens when the man is given bad fishing rods, his pond is contaminated, and though he may be given the opportunity to fish elsewhere, the vast majority of people who look like him are systematically kept out of the “good” ponds?

That is where we find ourselves in what Martin Luther King Jr. called “The Other America.”²⁶ On March 10, 1968, a little less than a month before his voice would be heard any more, King gave a prophetic oration in New York City as a call to action to mobilize a multiracial movement of America’s poor. The reality is that those two Americas still exist to this day. One has to look no further than the vast disparities in employment, wealth, healthcare, education, housing, and the justice system.

²⁶ King, Martin Luther. “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘The Other America’ Still Radical 50 Years Later.” Beacon Broadside: A Project of Beacon Press, March 10, 2018. <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/03/martin-luther-king-jrs-the-other-america-still-radical-50-years-later.html>.

It is quite clear, as Ta-nihisi Coates writes, there is “overwhelming evidence that America is irresponsible, immoral, and unconscionable in its dealings with black people and itself.”²⁷ People are wounded and treated carelessly, while others say peace where there is no peace.

As I sat one day in my study listening to Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” I stared at a picture from the 70s of a little black boy standing in front of an American flag, dressed as if he were about to go on a deployment to Vietnam. The image wouldn’t leave my mind. He was so precious and so resolute. It just so happened that I was in sermon prep to preach on Mark’s narration of the father whose son needed healing. I couldn’t help but connect the two little boys, the struggles of their lives, their confinement to “lines,” and their need for a new reality.

So here is my dream, my reflection, my hope for this Advent season of preparation for the coming of the Lord: let us pursue his peace; let us erase these lines.

These Lines

We told that we seen
We told that we known
But all we see is these lines
Made by them.

These lines that tell us here and no more
No.
We say no to these lines
We willing to cross.
We willing to be.

To will to be is to be courageous
But not blind.

To be blind is to fail
to see, to see, to know, to be.
But all we see is these lines

²⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Black Pathology and the Closing of the Progressive Mind.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, April 2, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/black-pathology-and-the-closing-of-the-progressive-mind/284523/>.

Made for me. You. Stay in line.

But these lines, these fateful, violent, hateful lines
Are only drawn, they not the end,
They not final.
These chains, I meant these lines.
These trees, I meant these lines.
These policies, I meant these lines.
Our blood, I meant these lines.
They not final. Erase these lines.

But.

To erase is to love.

To love is to feel. You. Him. Them. Us.

To feel is to see. You. Him. Them. Us.

To see what?

To see me. To see you. To see them. To see us, my brothers.

All of us. Erasing these lines. Your hand. Mine.

Drawing. Faith. Drawing. Hope. Drawing. Love.

Drawing. Peace. Drawing. Life.

Mine. Yours.

Lines. No more.

Questions

- As you read the poem, what resonates the most with you?
- How do you see “lines” at work in your community and nation, and what can you do this week to help erase those lines?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

Day 6

Philippians 3:10

Resurrection Power!

African-American Christianity has continuously confronted the nation with troubling questions about American exceptionalism. Perhaps the most troubling was this: “If Christ came as the Suffering Servant, who resembled Him more, the master or the slave?” Suffering-slave Christianity stood as a prophetic condemnation of America’s obsession with power, status, and possessions. African-American Christians perceived in American exceptionalism a dangerous tendency to turn the nation into an idol and Christianity into a clan religion.

—Albert Raboteau

“The Resurrection has proved its power; there are Christians—even in Rome.”²⁸ This is how Karl Barth, renowned Swiss theologian, described the conversion of the Roman Christians in his famous work *The Epistle to the Romans*. What he meant was that the resurrection of Jesus Christ had proved its reality because there were, in fact, Christians in Rome, the capital of the oppressive empire whose very authority had crucified Jesus, and that was indeed sufficient grounds for thanksgiving and belief.

As I reflected on the words of Barth, I couldn’t help but realize that as he was describing the faith of the Roman Christians, he was inviting us on a journey into the faith of Black Christians. The simple fact that the enslaved were able to “hold on” to Jesus, as it were, is in our day a story of the power of the Resurrection. Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, Jr., shared in their book *The Genesis of Liberation*, “African-Americans’ respect for the authority of the Christian Scriptures is a miracle in itself.”²⁹

You have to look no further than to the “Christ” they were introduced to to see the miracle. The “Jesus” they met in the Middle Passage and on the plantations was

²⁸ Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Ephesians*. (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2017). pg. 32

²⁹ Powery, Emerson B., and Rodney Steven Sadler. *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016). pg. 1

firmly on the side of the oppressor and opposing their freedom. This experience was not a neutral one. He clearly was used by the slavers and planters to pacify the slaves and to justify their enslavement. He clearly anointed and appointed the oppressors, not for the ministry of reconciliation but for their “ministry of subjugation.” He was the “White Man’s Jesus.”

In spite of this introduction, Powery and Sadler conclude that many African Americans, though not all, became Christians and attributed authority to the Bible. The question that remains is why. Why did enslaved Africans embrace the religion of their captors, who used the Bible to justify the brutal trans-Atlantic slave trade?

Powery and Sadler’s simple answer is that “they fell in love with the God of Scripture...In Christ they found salvation from their sins and reconciliation.”³⁰ They conclude that though this was certainly enough, there was more to the answer. In these texts they found not just an otherworldly God offering spiritual blessings, but a here-and-now God who cared principally for the oppressed, acting to deliver the downtrodden from their abusers.

They also found Jesus, a suffering Savior whose life and struggles paralleled their own struggles. In the biblical narratives that described these characters, the enslaved Africans found reasons to believe not only in the liberating power of the God of Scripture, but in the liberating emphasis of Scripture itself.

Because they learned that the Bible did not denigrate African identity, they were able to use it to ground their humanity, subversively to rebut biblically based white supremacist readings, to validate their right to be free and function as equals in this nation. They got peace, they got power, they got home.

As Dwight Hopkins writes, “through prayer and proper supplication to God, with Jesus as the captain of their old ship of Zion, and through the Spirit’s empowerment, black folks made it through to emancipation.”³¹ Because they made it, we are here. As someone once said, we are the answers to our ancestors prayers. God heard their cries.

³⁰ Ibid., 2.

³¹ West, Cornel, and Eddie S. Glaude. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, 826.

The Resurrection had proved its power; there are Christians—even among African Americans. Resurrection Power that brings Resurrection Peace!

That's Advent's good news.

Questions

- How has God's power been proven in you, your family, and your community?
- What are some things you learned that you didn't know after reading this devotional?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

Day 7

Numbers 6:24-26

Blessed to Be a Blessing

Because I've been blessed, I'm going to be a blessing.

—Charles E. Goodman

When I was a kid, I loved going to church. We would wake up early and have our time of devotion and breakfast. I had on my Sunday's best. We would arrive at the very familiar place and see very familiar people. All had names. All were known. The black church, in all its mess and failures, still had a particular way of making you feel like somebody, free, and deeply loved. You left feeling blessed. I was really glad when they said unto me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

That love never quite left me.

I think one of the things that's most meaningful to me today is the time at the conclusion of the service where the pastor stands with the people and says a blessing over them. Some pastors say phrases. Some say prayers. All say something that will help affirm self-worth, give the people a place to stand, remind them of things forgotten, and send them off knowing God's grace and love are available realities.

I personally have resonated deeply with the simple blessing that our pastor gives at the conclusion of each service: Because I've been blessed, I'm going to be a blessing.

If there is any word that tells the story of the holiday season, it is the word *blessing*. We have been blessed with life. We have been blessed with family and friends. We have been blessed by God's grace another day. We have been blessed with the greatest gift of all in Christ: God-with-us, God-for-us, God-in-us, and God-around-us. And because we have been blessed, the proper response is to enter back into our homes, our communities, on our jobs, in our world with one goal: blessing.

This reminds me of a story told of a priest and her journey into her neighborhood. As was her custom after each service, she would stand with others at the entrance and pronounce a blessing upon each attendee exiting into the world. “The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you.” Not only would she do this, but throughout the week she would also walk through her neighborhood, listen to the stories of the lives of others, and pronounce a blessing as she left. “The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you.”

It just so happened that one day on a routine stop, she came across a homeless man whom she noticed. She asked him if there was any need she could fill or prayer she could pray. He motioned her to sit down for a moment. He began to tell his story. They found themselves losing track of time. They had such a wonderful time together.

After the priest thanked him for the conversation and was about to leave, the man asked if he could pray for her. She said of course. He prayed and at the conclusion of his prayer, pulled out his Bible to his favorite verse where his divider was left. He pronounced the blessing: “The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Well, the priest hugged him with tears in her eyes. She realized that as she was busy pronouncing blessings over others, no one had pronounced a blessing over her. As she walked away, she paused, pulled out her pocket journal, and wrote these words: “Everyone has a blessing to offer. Everyone is a chance to be blessed by Christ.”

So in this season of preparation and reflection, grace and gratitude, hope and healing, prayer and peace, let us go bless.

When we bring Christ’s blessing, we also bring Christ’s peace.

“Because I’ve been blessed, I’m going to be a blessing.”

Questions

- How have you seen God bless you, your family, and your community this week?

- How can you show gratitude to God in blessing others?

Prayer

“Lord, make me an instrument of Thy Peace.” Teach me how to order my days that with sure touch I may say the right word at the right time and in the right way—lest I betray the spirit of peace. Keep watch with me, O my Father, over the days of my life, that with abiding enthusiasm I may be in such possession of myself that each day I may offer to Thee the full, unhampered use of me in all my parts as “an instrument of Thy Peace.” Amen.

L O V E



Day 1

Ezekial 34:14-16

Love in a Loveless World: A Meditation

...the world is not a pleasant place to be without someone to hold and be held by.

— Nikki Giovanni

As I write this, I am currently sitting in my hotel room. It is 5:00 a.m. I look to my right, and there he is. My precious, beautiful son. Full of life. Full of energy. He is in the phase of life where everything is interesting. He's learning words. Walking, running, playing, laughing. There he is, sound asleep. Not a care in the world.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night simply just to touch him. To lay my hand on him, close my eyes, and whisper a little prayer. As I silently pray for his survival, I am reminded of all the beautiful families who have whispered a little prayer over their children who were never to return again. Never to sing. Never to dance. Never to play. Never to hug. Never to ask for help. The world snuffed out their lives because it has not been a world built for them. You just never know. So I pray. Sometimes that's all we can do for young people that look like him. The world is not a pleasant place.

Imani Perry, in her letter to her sons entitled *Breathe*, lamented, “there are fingers itching to have a reason to cage or even slaughter you.”³² I can imagine that through tears of anger she wrote this line, “My God, what hate for beauty this world breeds.” I know that feeling.

It's like that time when an older white man started taking pictures of me and telling me that I didn't belong *here*. In a place where I was simply being human. He didn't care that I was a Christian. He didn't care that I was a master's student. He didn't care that I had a family depending on me. He didn't care how the incident would affect me. What hate for beauty, for freedom, for life, for love.

³² Perry, Imani. *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019). pg. 16,17.

That walk back home was incredibly hard. At one point, I had to stop off to the side. Bow my head and cry. These were not tears of weakness. I cried because I felt what many of those who looked like me have felt: the tragedy of blackness in a loveless world. The tragedy of having to keep on going. The tragedy of having to keep on loving those who do not love you back. What hate for beauty.

When I arrived home, I took another moment. I went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I told myself: You are black. You are known. You are loved. You must survive.

I guess I understand Advent a little better now. I guess I understand a little bit better some of the rejection Jesus must have felt when he too was told he did not belong.

It is not that this world will love you, because it will not. Especially the black you. It is that, as Paul Tillich, writes, "You Are Accepted!"³³ Accepted by a God who stands in Christ with us in the midst of a loveless world, in the midst of anger, in the midst of tears, in the midst of death. A God who promises to shepherd us, bind our wounds, strengthen our resolve, restore our joy, liberate the world to beauty. We are of worth not because our society says so. We are of worth because God our creator and redeemer says so. We have been loved. We are loved. And we try to love in a loveless world.

Yes, the world is not a pleasant place to be without someone to hold and be held by. But we hold on to God, we are held by God. We hold on to one another, we are held by one another.

Questions

- When was a time you, your family, and community felt unloved? Pause and take a minute to reflect on that.
- How can you hold on to God and hold on to others this week?

³³ Tillich, Paul, and F. Forrester. Church. *The Essential Tillich*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Day 2

Psalm 139:14, 15

Breathe

... love is my cipher of choice. One that I have decided is better to have than the social contract or law sitting at your core, because you have entered it rather than simply being bound.

— Imani Perry

I (Jasmine) wanted to write to my son to speak to the love I have for him and the joy of motherhood. I have found that becoming a mother is both life-changing and life-giving. It wasn't until after that I could see the parallels between the love of God and the deep love I have for my son.

It is a love that waits, longs for, embraces. It is a love that lets us know that we are loved despite the many things that tell us otherwise. It is a love that is self-giving, self-sacrificing, and life-producing. It is a love that loves beyond the bounds of the broken to make beautiful pieces.

Here is my Advent reflection: a letter to my son.

My dearest Asa,

I think carrying you for 41 weeks and 2 days were the most anxious days of my life. All day every day my thoughts were filled with “what if” scenarios. Although being pregnant was one of the most joyous and incredible experiences of my life, I would be lying if I didn't admit that a cloud of fear loomed over me.

Would you be healthy? Would you hit all your milestones? Would you be a “good” baby? How would I parent you? Would I mess you up in some way?

Breathe.

In those moments, I turned to God and prayed. I needed to remind myself of truth.

The truth that before I even knew you (or before you were even a thought in my mind), you were known by Him. Loved by Him. You must know that my love for you, even though it feels as the deepest, truest, most inexplicable thing I can imagine, is only a fraction of His love for you.

Breathe.

I forced myself to take a breath.

I had to remind myself that no matter how hard I would like to keep you little and protect you forever, I am really just a vessel. An instrument used to steward your life while you are under my care. To raise you. To train you up.

See, that's the interesting paradox of motherhood: knowing that you are responsible for this young, innocent life that you have been entrusted with, while simultaneously knowing that you control nothing.

Breathe.

With this in mind, it makes the sometimes daunting task of raising you with a sense of self love, love of others, and love of God seem impossible.

But I must.

Raising you is one of the greatest honors and one of the great heartbreaks I will ever have. I still lose my breath when I think of this privilege but still also feel the weight of horror of the world you have to live in.

Raising you to not become hard to the crushing weight of societal pressures and assumptions. Their judgments and ignorance. Their norms and stereotypes.

Breathe.

Raising you to not fall victim to "imposter syndrome", trying to be someone that you're not. But instead, teaching you to walk through life with your head held high, knowing exactly who you are. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are black and you are beautiful.

Breathe.

Raising you on love and the freedom that comes with it. To live freely and unapologetically in a loveless world without becoming loveless yourself. To take the time to strip yourself down to the core, as Imani says, to the simplest of joys. She says, “it might not be enough, but if it is something. And the fact is, if you get desire right, you will probably get love right too.”³⁴

You must do this. You must get love right. I know something of this love that was birthed inside of me from the time I saw those two lines. A love that granted me a space of freedom. One that allowed me to heal old wounds and connect with something new inside of me.

I would no longer caught in between in the fears of what-ifs and the unknown of what was to come. But live a more bold and confident life not being weighed down by overthinking or the moments of judgment on myself and others. But extending grace and compassion instead.

Giving birth to you and experiencing this new type of love gave a fresh perspective on a scripture I’ve heard most of my life. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And in Him are we granted this freedom. The freedom to love without limits. The freedom to love ourselves fully. The freedom to love one another and our communities. Knowing that it is one that we have chosen to enter and are not simply bound.

It is in this place that we have the freedom to rest in God’s love and just **breathe**.

Questions

- Read the scripture from today again. What do you learn about yourself, others, our world, and God?
- How can you, your family, and community rest in God’s love and just breathe?

³⁴ Perry, Imani. *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons.*, 147.

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Day 3

Zephaniah 3:14-20

A Love Supreme

The religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central. It seems clear that Jesus started out with the simple teaching concerning love embodied in the timeless words of Israel: "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

—Howard Thurman

There was something about my grandfather and his piano. When I was younger, I would visit their house, walk in, and hear him playing his favorite tune. His feet would be stomping. His head would be bobbing. As he played, it was as if he were raptured up in the love of the moment—just him, his piano, and his God. I remember that joy. I remember how deeply it struck me as a kid. Maybe I can attribute my love of music to those early moments.

One thing about my grandfather was that he never wanted to experience it alone. He would always beckon us to come. I would sit beside him. Look at him playing in amazement and start playing my tune as well. There I was: hands going. Feet stomping. Head bobbing. Caught up in the improvisation of love. I surely didn't know what I was doing, and I'm sure it sounded horrible on top of what he was playing, but he didn't stop me.

He must have known something that I didn't. He must have known that if I could simply sit, be willing to join, willing to fail, but also willing to listen, then one day, I too would make a beautiful melody capable of capturing hearts. I too would invite others into an experience of love.

Though my grandad was teaching me about love and jazz, he was also teaching me something about love and Jesus. The season of Advent beckons us again and again to sit with Jesus as he makes a beautiful melody in our world. If we can listen closely enough, we can hear God singing: I am in your midst, do not fear, I will rejoice over you, I will renew you with my love, I will remove disaster from you, I

will free you from the shame of oppression and deal with the oppressors, I will save, I will bring you home.

The promise of God-with-us has come and will come again. God is beating back evil's reign and filling the gaps in our broken lives and world. Everywhere we turn in our world, despite the ugliness and sadness, we can hear the voice of love.

Lewis Porter, author of *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, tells something of this voice of love as he reflects on Coltrane's masterful piece *A Love Supreme*. Nearing the end of part one, "Acknowledgement," Coltrane begins to play the 'Love Supreme' motif, "but he changes the key another time, another time, another time."³⁵ This seems unusual. It does not follow the technical movements of jazz improvisation.

By the time he had finished, Coltrane has played the motif in all possible keys. It didn't make sense, but Coltrane was trying to send us a message. "He's experimented with it. He's improvised with great intensity," Porter says. Now "he's saying it's everywhere. It's in all 12 keys. Anywhere you look, you're going to find this 'Love Supreme.'"

Everywhere we look, we too find this Love Supreme.

John Coltrane once reflected on his own album. As he worked through his own personal trials and triumphs, he simply writes, "At this time I would like to tell you that no matter what...it is with God. He is gracious and merciful. His way is in love, through which we all are. It is truly a LOVE SUPREME."³⁶

As we travel the way of brokenness and beauty, we are sure that grace, mercy, and love follows us every step of the way. That was Coltrane's story. That is our story.

"A Love Supreme."

"A Love Supreme."

"A Love Supreme."

³⁵ Westervelt, Eric. "The Story Of 'A Love Supreme'." NPR. NPR, March 7, 2012. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2000/10/23/148148986/a-love-supreme>.

³⁶ Coltrane, John. "A Love Supreme: Album Liner Notes." *aln2.albumlinernotes*, December 9, 1964. http://aln2.albumlinernotes.com/A_Love_Supreme.html.

Questions

- How have you recently been reminded of or experienced God's grace, mercy, and love?
- Take some time to relax and listen to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" this week.

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Day 4

Luke 4:14-19

What ‘Chu Know About Jesus?

That God could “make a way out of no way” in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Christ crucified manifested God’s loving and liberating presence in the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that ultimately, in God’s eschatological future, they would not be defeated by “the troubles of this world” no matter how great and painful their suffering.

—James Cone

Space matters.

I’m not speaking of the space that captures the imagination of the many young people who dream of seeing the stars upon which they wish. I’m speaking of the space that’s here on the ground—the space we form, the space that forms us. I absolutely love the space I grew up in—my black Pentecostal space. There was something thrilling and exciting about entering the church space where it seemed that the people, if only for a moment, were caught up in the dance of God. Those weary and wounded souls of black folk were finally able to find rest for their arduous journey.

I remember this space very well. It seems somehow through all the challenges of facing the absurd, those beautiful people still had a song. It takes a lot of faith to keep on singing. Such a faith can’t be built on a fantasy or a principle, nor can it be “the opium of the people,” as some foolishly say. Such a faith isn’t even built on a program. This faith was built on radical trust in a living person: Jesus Christ.

Any discussion of Advent must begin and end with a question I heard sung over and over as a kid: “Tell Me What ‘Chu Know About Jesus?” The people would answer: “He’s alright. I done tried him, and he’s alright.”

It seems to me that this is the affirmation of Advent: we done tried him, and he's alright.

One day I came across an interview with James Baldwin and Reinhold Niebuhr as they spoke of the tragedy of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that killed four of our precious little ones. They were so young and so full of life. And in a moment, were dead. The only thing left: a broken heart and a faceless Christ in the stained glass window.

Baldwin was asked, "Does this faceless picture suggest to you a meaning of the Birmingham tragedy?" Baldwin pauses, physically stilled by such a weighty question, and responds, "It sums up the crisis that we are living through. If Christ has no face, then perhaps it is time that we...give him a new face, give him a new consciousness, make the whole hope of Christian love a reality."³⁷

Though few outside the black community were moved by this tragedy, young people from Wales were so touched that they raised money to replace the faceless Christ. Within two years, artist John Petts delivered a gift from Wales: "a defiant and heart-warming image of black Jesus beneath a rainbow of racial unity; his right arm pushing away hatred and injustice, the left offering forgiveness."³⁸

Rev. Arthur Price remembers well the gift and its symbolism: "I think the major message we try to take out of the window is not so much identifying Christ's colour but knowing that Christ identifies with us."³⁹

It is no wonder that this symbolic image of black Jesus was deeply pressed in the souls of black folk. In such a world—so loveless, so violent, so hateful—"the black Christian as he or she experiences suffering, rejection, and loneliness in a white racist society needs a savior who knows his or her name—a redeemer who individualizes love."⁴⁰ The *black* Christ meets us against the background of this history and is "with the black person in his or her experience of oppression."⁴¹ The hope of glory has been the help in history.

³⁷ "The Meaning of the Birmingham Tragedy, 1963." Pearl Digital Collections. Accessed November 28, 2019. <https://digital.history.pcusa.org/islandora/object/islandora:71692>.

³⁸ Prior, Neil. "Alabama Church Bombing Victims Honoured by Welsh Window." BBC News. BBC, March 10, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-12692760>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation: a Black Theology*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). pg. 74.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

He is our help as the good news of God-with-us who rescues and renews. He is the one who brings release and refuge to the disinherited. He is the one who makes a way out of no way and of whose kingdom freedom and love will have no end. He is the one who identifies with us. He is the Liberator, the Reconciler, the Revolutionary, and the Lord of all. He is the one who enters our *space* and says, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” and that Spirit “is the basis of a black hope secure in the God of the resurrection, who is a God of love and power, who promises to be with us always and to make all things new.”⁴²

He is the hope of our today, our tomorrow, and every step of the way.

So when we are asked “What ‘chu know about Jesus?” We answer: He’s alright. We done tried him, and he’s alright.

Questions

- How have you seen God make a way out of no way in your life?
- What is one way this week you can make whatever space you enter be a place to meet and be met by the love of Jesus?

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don’t do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

⁴² Ibid., 77.

Day 5

John 3:16

Enfleshing Love, Love Enfleshed

But there is one who does not forget—Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ of God. He does not forget poor, dark, despised bodies. For these, for all, for us, he gave his body in fidelity to the basileia tou theou, the reign of God, which opposes the reign of sin. Jesus of Nazereth is the paradigm of enfleshing freedom, he is freedom enfleshed.

—M. Shawn Copeland

“Jason Reynolds is on a mission.”

This is how the *New York Times* recently described his work as he sought to give voice through writing to the lives of young black people. In their stories there is complexity. There is anger. There is betrayal. There is hurt. There are guns and violence. But there is also hope. There is endurance. There is joy.

He never could quite shake the joy embodied in the jokes and laughter of their beautiful souls as they walked between tragedy and triumph. “You don’t go through what black and brown people have been through in this country,” Reynolds shares, “and survive without understanding how to tap into some joy.”⁴³

Throughout all of his writing and speaking, he has one goal: “My job is to say, ‘I understand. I see you.’” That is how he loves.

I couldn’t get the picture out of my mind as I scrolled and saw the young people gripping his book as if their lives depended on it. In some sense, they do. One of the greatest challenges today is how to feel and know that you are loved when the most real experience is feeling unloved, unheard, and unseen. Forsaken and forgotten. They must know, *we* must know that we are understood, we are seen, and we are loved.

⁴³ León, Concepción De. “Jason Reynolds Is on a Mission.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/28/books/jason-reynolds-look-both-ways.html>.

This is what Advent does. It invites us on a journey out of our forgetfulness and redirects us on the way of love. Through the memory and message of Jesus, we are invited on a journey to see again the heart of God, the heart of others, and the heart of our world. We are invited back to the life of love in Jesus. For God so loved *this* world.

There he stands with the woman at the well. There he is gathering the little children up in his arms. There he goes healing and setting free. There he is forgiving those who do not deserve. There he is hanging between two thieves. There he is rising, never to die again. There he is loving this world every day into the way God wants it, making the world God's home. There he is. He too, is on his mission.

To be in the truth of Jesus, to belong to his kingdom, Rowan Williams writes, "is to be on the road to seeing the world whole, seeing the world with the eyes of God."⁴⁴ Here we learn something of enfleshing love from Jesus and Jason Reynolds. Where there is the experience of being unseen and unheard, loving is seeing. Seeing God, seeing ourselves, seeing others, and seeing the world through, what Jonathan Walton calls, the "Lens of Love."⁴⁵

But loving is not simply seeing. There is more.

Where there is the experience of being bruised and broken, loving is being—being where Jesus is and being in the company of the people Jesus is being with. Where there is the experience of emotional pain and social misery, loving is forgiving and committing to peace. Where there is the experience of helplessness and the weight of the inhumane, loving is acting for the good of the whole person and the whole world.

Where there is the experience of forgetfulness of the many dehumanized and despised, loving is remembering the wounds, the story they tell, and being the presence of healing. Where there is the experience of shame, loving is embracing and empowering. Where there is the experience of separation and loss, loving is being God's "welcome home!"

⁴⁴ Williams, Rowan. *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000). pg. 90.

⁴⁵ Walton, Jonathan L. *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in Its World for Our World*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

This is good news we hear, this is the good we bring. This is enfleshing love, this is love enfleshed.

Only such love can transform this broken world into beautiful.

Questions

- Who are those around you that are not seen that you should take notice of?
- What are some ways you can love like Jesus today?

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Day 6

John 15:12

Practicing What We Preach

But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word "integration" means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.

— James Baldwin

I sat down with my grandmother some time ago and asked her to tell me about her life. At first, she didn't want to. One can only imagine what deep scars eighty-six years have bore on her soul. Weeks later, I asked again. The stories were hard. It's difficult to describe what it meant for her to live in the South as a black woman. One word seemed to capture the audacity of survival in the midst of a cruel world: love. "The Lord hasn't failed me yet," she said. She wasn't just telling her story; she was telling the story of the many black people who have loved in the face of evil.

In many ways, we have come to view love as sentimental, a nicety. People use "love" to describe a feeling even when it carries no moral or ethical responsibility for them. Not so in the black faith tradition. For us, love has meant resistance and resilience. In the words of Baldwin, it means that we shall "force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."⁴⁶

This kind of radical, life-changing, community-changing, world-changing love is, after all, the way of Jesus. He came preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing all manner of sickness and affliction. This is a dangerous love.

It means that one cannot prophesy love without the experience of liberation, and one cannot prophesy liberation without the goal of love. Love calls us to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger; to face the threat of loss of

⁴⁶ Baldwin, James. "A Letter to My Nephew." Progressive.org, December 1, 1962. <https://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/>.

power, authority, privilege, comfort, lies. This love calls us to face ourselves, to face our sins, our history, our violence, our policies, our practices, and do whatever it takes to change.

Down through time, it has been a constant theme that the powerful crush the powerless. For the powerless, life is not human; they are unloved, and their sense of dignity, power, and agency is always bound to the chains that hold them. They cry: Help, O Lord! To this, God speaks: because the needy groan, I will now rise up, I will place them in the safety for which they long. For us, love means joining God in God's work of liberating love, power, and justice. Our faith prays while our feet move.

Loving does not simply put up with reality as it is, but does what it must to suffer against it and contradict it and change we must.

The choice is ours. Chaos or community? Hate or hope? Selfishness or solidarity? The way of darkness or the way of light? The way of destruction or the way of life? The choice is always ours.

So I return to the question: What are we to do? For me, it has meant patiently sitting with my grandmother and her story. Stories capture history and hope in a way that speaks deeply to the soul. Stories of hope in the midst of chaos. Stories of anger in the midst of evil. Stories of love in the midst of despair.

But story also means struggle. You can't be neutral on a moving train; you also can't be neutral when the story is happening. Like my grandmother would say, you have to practice what you preach!

Questions

- Which story in Black history do you resonate most deeply with?
- What is it about that person or event that you learn and will put into practice?

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Day 7

Micah 6:8

The Story We Tell, The Story We Live

Our context dictates that we seek ways to liberate, to elevate, and to point the way of salvation to people who are African American and Christian. We are here because we believe we have a story to tell to the nation, and our experience has something special to say to the world.

—Cheryl Townsend Gilkes

In the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," Nikole Hannah-Jones writes, "Black Americans have been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom."⁴⁷ On the 400th anniversary of Africans arriving to this land as slaves, she makes the case that "It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy," that black Americans have pushed toward the country's ideals despite their circumstances.

I've heard it said that history is a "dangerous" memory. It never lets us go until we attest to the wounds and commit to healing. It presses upon us that piercing but powerful word: *love, love, love.*

Still, it is hard to see how society might change, how such healing might finally come about. Rarely does the one who injures another have the moral imagination to do right unless forced. Even spiritual awakening, religious education, and visionary declarations have often borne bad fruit. Plenty of promises of peace and freedom only brought on further oppression. The brokenness and weight of our world feels so much like darkness that Elie Wiesel, retelling of the horrors of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, could only call it *Night*.

⁴⁷ Hannah-jones, Nikole. "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=56B1A88ED1C498A23801DB5D17463934&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>.

Even if we don't have all the answers now, we must bear witness. We must tell our story. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, writes, " We are here because we believe we have a story to tell to the nation, and our experience has something special to say to the world."⁴⁸ Our language and storytelling have a way of helping us in the dark. In a time of religious, social, economic, and political chaos, it seems critical that we sit at the feet of these stories of freedom.

This is what makes Negro spirituals, and the history of black faith in America, so profound. In the shadow of the colonized homeland, the slave ship, and the lynching tree, these holy artists went to work. It's inherently absurd to proclaim faith and freedom in such contexts; they had the audacity to survive.

Thomas Merton thought of these historic composers as revolutionary poets and of their songs as prophetic songs. Deep in the souls of black folk was a hope that their cruel surroundings could not crush. Merton was right: Such religion is not the "opium of the people," but a prophetic fire of love and courage, fanned by the breath of the Spirit as they sang choruses of, "Swing lo, sweet chariot," "Let my people go," and, "Oh, glory hallelujah!"

When Rebecca Proppen traveled the rough roads of the island of Antigua, her life would prove the catalyst for that of Sojourner Truth, the slave woman turned evangelist champion for the end of slavery. When Richard Allen decided to walk out of the dark clouds of segregation and into the sunshine of racial justice, his life would prove a catalyst for the young Martin Luther King, Jr. who would stand against the dark clouds of racism, militarism, and poverty.

When Jarena Lee had the courage to stand up and proclaim God's truth despite being a woman, her life became a catalyst for the civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, who stood up and trusted God. When Medgar Evers lay dying after being shot and screamed out, "Sit me up! Turn Me Loose!" he was the catalyst for many of the young people today being let loose to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

This is the story we tell, this is the story we live.

⁴⁸ Sanders, Cheryl Jeanne. *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).

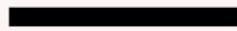
Questions

- What is a familiar story of resilience and resistance in your family or community that you can retell this week?
- How did you see God show up in that story?

Prayer

Dear Lord, I stand in the midst of a loveless world.
I am trying to love but it is hard.
I want to acknowledge that.
Sometimes I cry, sometimes I lose my cool,
sometimes I just don't do anything at all.
But in all times, remind me of your love in Jesus,
who suffered, died, and rose again,
who has come, will come, and is already here.
Grant me the strength and courage to
love myself, love my neighbor, and love you God.
In Jesus name, Amen.

F R E E D O M



Day 1

Luke 2:8-11

Prophecy Hope!: A Meditation

Afro-American Christianity is Christocentric to the core—yet Jesus Christ is not simply understood as an agent of deliverance but also a human exemplar of pain and agony. The crucified Christ looms as large as the risen Christ. The conception of freedom prevalent in Afro-American Christianity possesses three dimensions: the existential, the social, and the eschatological..freedom is a mode of being-in-the-world that resists dread and despair.

— Cornel West

In a 2015 article entitled “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear,” Toni Morrison recalled the day after Christmas 2004 following the re-election of George W. Bush. Feeling helpless and depressed, she couldn’t find the words to write for the moment. She felt that she *must* write but was paralyzed and “unable to write anything more in the novel I’ve begun.”⁴⁹

She then received an unexpected call from her friend. It was not the call she wanted, but surely the call she needed. As she was expressing her feelings to her friend, he interrupted her. “No! No! This is precisely the time when artists go to work—not when everything is fine, but in times of dread. That is our job!”⁵⁰

She remembers well that emphatic “No!” Sometimes that’s just what we need in moments of despair. She realized that there “is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear.” It is precisely in these moments of dread that we go to work.

If there is anything that Advent teaches us, it is that the period of waiting is no peaceful time. It is not a time when all is right in the world. It is a time when nations

⁴⁹ Morrison, Toni. “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear.” *The Nation*, August 6, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

are at war with one another. The world is bruised and bleeding. People are dehumanized, displaced, and disinherited. And while this is happening, we cannot look away; we must pay attention. We are indeed artists in God's world, and we must go do God's work. We use our redeemed imagination to construct something beautiful out of broken pieces.

One of the greatest gifts of Christianity is the gift of the hope of freedom that keeps us going. Theologians in history refer to this as "living in the already not yet." The world has already been changed in Christ, but what it will be is not yet what it is. We are already freed from the chains of sin and separation, but we are not yet fully free to the realization of Beloved community. There is already the promise of future victory, but we are not yet fully free of present defeat.

So what do we do?

We witness.

We refuse to succumb to the cruelty of the world. We refuse to ignore the pain and cries of those who suffer. We refuse to not be moved. We refuse to give up hope.

See, black people have had to do this in the worst of times. And as my sister says, you better learn from people who have been through something. Having to survive and thrive while also bearing the deep wounds of tragedy and trauma will teach you something about hope, peace, love, and freedom. It teaches you that you must hold on. Hold on to Jesus. Hold on to one another. Hold on when you just don't feel like holding. Hold on when you're tired.

Cornel West was right to say that Black Christianity "promotes a gospel that empowers black people to survive and struggle in a God-forsaken world."⁵¹ At the heart of this good news is the fact that Jesus doesn't simply come down but also comes with. He is the divine deliverer who is also "a human exemplar of pain and agony."⁵² And pain and agony are stepping stones to freedom. On the other side of the darkness of Friday, the silence of Saturday, is the good news that on Sunday, freedom is coming!

Something like the freedom of the body bound to slavery that Baby Suggs speaks when she preaches in *Beloved*, "Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps,

⁵¹ West, Cornel. *The Cornel West Reader*. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 1999). pg. 439.

⁵² *Ibid.* 436.

laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass.”⁵³ Freedom of the mind, freedom of the soul, freedom of the body, freedom of the world. That freedom that the Spirituals speak of when they sing *Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh freedom ova me!* even though freedom is at a distance.

As long as we have this flesh, this body that God has given us, we have life, we have grace, we have mercy, we have hope, we have freedom.

We must *flesh*.

We must weep.

We must laugh.

We must play.

We must hope against hope.

We must live.

We must love.

We must be free.

We must be in the world and resist dread and despair with God’s good news of great joy for all the people. As Cornel West says, we must be those who embody a “subversive joy and revolutionary patience, which works for and looks to the kingdom to come.”⁵⁴

We must prophesy hope my brothers and sisters! We must prophesy hope!

Questions

- When was a time in your life that you remember being in dread and despair? How did God carry you through this time?
- How can you help those around you get through their times of dread and despair?

⁵³ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: a Novel*. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1987). pg. 87,88.

⁵⁴ West, Cornel. *The Cornel West Reader*, 439.

Prayer

Lord, Lord, open unto me!
Open unto me, light for my darkness
Open unto me, courage for my fear
Open unto me, hope for my despair
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow
Open unto me, strength for my weakness
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness
Open unto me, love for my hates
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

Day 2

1 John 4:10, 11

To Be A Christian

Our goal is to change the world we understand, not because Karl Marx suggested we do so, but because we serve a God who has changed this world and invites us to yield our bodies to that changing power.

— Willie James Jennings

There was once a story told of a white seminarian in class with an older black pastor. As he heard the pastor's story, he was captivated. So intrigued was this young man that he started to go to his church. He quickly realized he was in a different world. The people. The worship. The shouting. The preaching. The stories. He couldn't get past the stories.

Well, one day as they were at lunch, he finally gathered the courage to ask the pastor the question many people ask once they visit black churches: why is church so long? The older pastor gave a chuckle and then got very serious. He looked at the young man in his eye and said, "Son, you have seen our people. They come from a world that tells them that they are less-than. Yet they show up. Sunday is here, but Monday is coming. I have to love them into believing and remembering they are loved. And it takes me a good three hours just to make them feel like somebody."

I have always deeply resonated with that story. It tells us something of the type of people we should want to become in this season of reflection and renewal; the type of people who live in the gospel and live out the gospel by making people "feel like somebody." We want to become the place in the world where the love and freedom of God can come alive.

Our society is not too different from the society of the people of God who were awaiting God's great deliverance. Like them, we are trying to learn, tell, and live over and over again the story of Jesus. We too are trying to be what N.T. Wright calls 'Advent people': people of light in a dark world, people of hope in times and

places of despair. People who follow Jesus.⁵⁵ We are always trying to catch up with God where God is going and trying to be found in the neighborhood of Jesus. For that is where the good news is. That is what our world needs.

Willie Jennings tells something of this neighborhood that we follow Jesus in. It is a neighborhood of suffering and confusion. It is a neighborhood that we cannot escape. It is a neighborhood where people are terrorized by the evils of racism, fear, greed, and violence. It is the places around us where individuals and communities are bound to spiritual, social, economic and political misery.

But this is the place where our hands are called to work, and we do not make peace with it. Christians must never accept the contradictions we see in ourselves and in our world; instead, we challenge them through acts of healing and hope, justice and freedom, dignity and power, peace and friendship.

But that is not all we do.

From our vantage point here in the not-yet, we also spy out the places of freedom and joy even in the midst of struggle. It is here that we give witness to the life of God and the love of life and the love of people. Ultimately, Jennings writes, a Christian “is one who is convinced by the love of God for this world and is compelled to live out that conviction.”⁵⁶

In an interview, Tupac once stated that he wanted to spark minds who would change the world.⁵⁷ He said that it is our job to spark somebody else who is watching us. I feel that. In the same way, Jesus invites us: come change the world. Not because others have said so, but because “we serve a God who has changed this world and invites us to yield our bodies to that changing power.”⁵⁸

This is where the season of Advent takes us. That is where the world is headed: the resurrection of life, the freedom of love.

That is the new world we join God in making. That is what it means to be Christian.

⁵⁵ Wright, N.T. *Advent for Everyone*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018). pg. ix.

⁵⁶ Jennings, Willie. “Willie Jennings: To Be a Christian Intellectual.” Willie Jennings: To be a Christian intellectual | Yale Divinity School, October 30, 2015. <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/willie-jennings-be-christian-intellectual>.

⁵⁷ Vibe. “VIBE Remembers Their Favorite Tupac Moments.” Vibe, August 29, 2015. <https://www.vibe.com/2015/06/vibe-favorite-tupac-moments>.

⁵⁸ Jennings, *To Be A Christian Intellectual*.

Now go make people feel like somebody!

Questions

- Where can you spy out the places of joy this week?
- What is one way you can make someone around you feel like somebody who is seen, known, and deeply loved?

Prayer

Lord, Lord, open unto me!
Open unto me, light for my darkness
Open unto me, courage for my fear
Open unto me, hope for my despair
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow
Open unto me, strength for my weakness
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness
Open unto me, love for my hates
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

Day 3 (Christmas Eve)

Luke 1:46-56

Joy Comes in the Morning

African American spirituals provide an excellent medium by which to cross the divide between the first and second coming. Through them, all people can come to a better understanding of unconditional love, justice, mercy, hope, faith, and community that Jesus brings for the flourishing of all of God's children.

—Cheryl Kirk-Duggan

Here we are again. Waiting. Watching.

Advent has a way of taking us back to the darkness and the silence. The darkness in ourselves and the darkness in our world. The silence that produces anxiety. The silence that produces fear. The silence that produces a longing that cries out for the light.

This season of reflection reminds that what we do not simply pay attention to our own lives and stories but it also takes us back to Jerusalem—to the lives, stories, dreams, and hopes of those waiting for a Messiah who would make the world again. We have a borrowed hope.

Sometimes that's all people have. Their hope and their voice. It's like the voice of John the Baptist who prepared the way of the Lord. Or like the voice of Mary who cried in song that the favor of the Lord rested upon her. Or like the prophet Anna who, even in old age, was determined to tell the story of the Messiah. All these had their voice.

There is something about the voice. No matter what is going on in the body or in life, if we have a voice, a song, a sound; if we can lift it, somehow we can keep on going. It's much like the Spirituals. This "rhythmic singing, swaying, dancing, preaching, talking and walking—all features of black life—are weapons of struggle

and survival.”⁵⁹ Wrapped up in the song is the sense of dignity and power that presses on through the tragic dimensions of life between lament and love. The lyrical focus ever points our mind away from our resources to the redemptive power of God. It is through these songs that we come to a “better understanding of unconditional love, justice, mercy, hope, faith and community that Jesus brings for the flourishing of all God’s children.”⁶⁰

These songs do not simply tell of the pain of hope and waiting, but they also keep us together. Who can deny the beauty and the power of the collective song of the struggle to live and trust God? Who can deny the beauty of the promise of God’s coming bound to the collective voice of Israel?

Both tell us a word we long to hear: Joy is coming in the morning.

We see joy in the past in God’s initiative toward the world in Christ. Joy is in the future in God’s coming victory in Christ. Joy is present in a cruciform life of love for the world in the *here and now*.⁶¹ There is a God who sits high and looks low. There is a God who stands in the darkness and the silence and says: I’m on the way.

So, here we are again. Waiting and watching.

While we wait and watch, we worship.

We sing.

Joy is coming in the morning.

Questions

- What can you be joyful for today?
- What can you do to help bring joy to you, your family, and your community?

⁵⁹ West, Cornel. *The Cornel West Reader*, 436.

⁶⁰ Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. *Mary Had a Baby: a Bible Study Based on African American Spirituals*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), pg. 6.

⁶¹ Rutledge, Fleming. *Advent: the Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), pg. 7.

Prayer

Lord, Lord, open unto me!
Open unto me, light for my darkness
Open unto me, courage for my fear
Open unto me, hope for my despair
Open unto me, peace for my turmoil
Open unto me, joy for my sorrow
Open unto me, strength for my weakness
Open unto me, wisdom for my confusion
Open unto me, forgiveness for my sins
Open unto me, tenderness for my toughness
Open unto me, love for my hates
Open unto me, Thy Self for myself
Lord, Lord, open unto me!

Day 4 (Christmas Day)

Revelation 21:1-7

Joy Unspeakable!

As God is directing everything that has happened, does happen, and will happen, God will not let God's people witness in vain. This is the import of the title "Alpha and Omega," which John applies to both God and Christ. Ultimately the end is not a place or a time, but a person. History reaches its goal in Christ.

—Brian Blount

In the year 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached what would be one of the greatest speeches in the history of American life. Many over the world remember that day clearly. I usually try to ask people who were alive during that time what that day was like for them. I remember asking my grandmother about that day. You could just see the joy come over her body as she takes a trip down memory lane. She was so proud. There he was, in front of all those people, bearing witness. She was so, so proud.

There was a good reason to be proud. Bound to Martin's voice was the vision of God for the world. Bound to his voice was the good news of liberation for the oppressed, sight to the blind, healing for the wounded, and the year of the Lord's favor. He was the man for the moment. He represented that beatific vision as he brought God's gospel of freedom into the heart of the nation.

In the face of the ugliness of segregation and the violence of white supremacy, Martin shouted out "I have a dream!" In the face of injustice and the heat of oppression, "I have a dream!" In the face of a nation that told little children that their black was not beautiful "I have a dream!" In the face of the social and economic conditions that choked out black hope, "I have a dream!" He had a dream that "the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be

revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. Hallelujah!”⁶² The people erupted in praise. Good news deserved a glad response.

As Martin reflected on his life and ministry, his vocation as pastor, activist, and intellectual, he simply stated, “All that I do in civil rights I do because I consider it a part of my ministry.”⁶³ There is one goal for Martin, and there is one goal of history. The end is not wrapped in a time, nor is the ultimate goal wrapped in a place—it is all wrapped up in a person. There is he, laid in a manger. God has not forgotten us. God is for us. God is with us. As Brian Blount writes, “History reaches its goal in Christ.”⁶⁴

For wherever Christ is, there is hope, there is peace, there is love, there is freedom.

There is Joy Unspeakable!

Now go.

Go forth in the strength gathered during Advent.

Go prophesy hope,
Go prophesy peace,
Go prophesy love,
Go prophesy freedom!

**Enjoy your Christmas with your family today.
Relax and rest in the joy of Christ.**

⁶² “I Have a Dream,” Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, January 25, 2019.
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

⁶³Fleet, Josh. “Want To Understand Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Read The Sermons.” HuffPost. HuffPost, January 21, 2013.
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-gift-of-love-martin-luther-king-sermons-from-strength-to-love-excerpt_n_2499321.

⁶⁴ Blount, Brian K., Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery. *True to Our Native Land: an African American New Testament Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), pg. 555.

Afterword: A Labor of Love

In this endeavor to wed the vision of the Old World with that of the New, it is the writer, not the statesman, who is our strongest arm. Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.

—James Baldwin

How about you write something and we will discuss it next week week? That is how this project came to life. It began with a question from my friend, Vanessa Diffenbaugh. We were at Starbucks discussing both of our work, its connections, and how we could encourage one another to keep on going, to keep on writing.

As I was leaving our meeting, I noticed something interesting. At the place where drinks are picked up there were two little boxes. Both were filled to the brim with notecards. There was a pen in front of both, just waiting to be picked up by the next person, the next person, and the next person. The sticker on the front of the right box read, *pick up a boost*. The sticker on the left read, *leave your worries*. I did just that. And that was my goal in this project as we walked through Advent: pick up your boost, leave your worries.

I knew I had to write because I knew I had something to say. I knew that there was so much that we could learn, that I learned, from the black tradition. There was so much resilience. So much faith, hope, and love that I felt I had to do my part in retelling their stories.

During this process, I came across the story of Moses at the burning bush in my personal time of prayer. Something struck me about that story: the fire went out. It would make sense that Moses wanted to stay at the bush as he met with God, we all would. But the fire went out. There is no way to know this for sure, but I believe that the fire went out because it must burn elsewhere: in Moses, in the people, in Egypt.

As I met with God at my burning bush through the many wonderful works that I came across that helped me think about Advent, the fire did burn. It burned as I took a journey with my people from slave ships to auction blocks, from hush

harbors to hot fields, from Jim Crow to civil rights, from Black revolution to Black Lives Matter.

It burned as I read the literary genius from Toni Morrison to James Baldwin to Imani Perry to Kevin Quashie. It burned as I read the theological beauty from J. Deotis Roberts to James Cone to Barbara Holmes to my own grandmother. It burned as I was driving in my car hearing the preaching voice of Martin Luther King Jr. and melodic masterpiece of John Coltrane travel through the corridors of history. It burned every time I sat down in the morning not knowing which words to say, simply pressing on to the last word. Lord knows it burned.

But the fire went out. My time writing this reflection has come to an end. The fire must burn elsewhere.

The fire must burn in you.
The fire must burn in our world.

It is here that, as Baldwin says, “the tangible dreams of people have tangible effect on the world.”⁶⁵

It is here that the labor of love, fueled by the love of Christ, weds the vision of the Old world with that of the New.

It is here that we find hope, peace, love, and freedom.

And in those moments when you are tired, when you feel like giving up, when you feel that God is silent and asleep, return to the bush.

There is always a word from the Lord there.

⁶⁵ Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993., 12.

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3. Ibid. xi

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