

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

2023



ReconcilingWorks
LUTHERANS FOR FULL PARTICIPATION



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HOPE

Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:24-37



Let us pray,

Holy living God, blessed Jesus, guiding Spirit, alight within us your flame of hope this day. Grant us openness to hear your message. Grant us the courage to be your messengers in the world, creating more hope in the midst of fear. In times of shadowed sun and waning moon, lift up our unknowing hearts and awaken our sleeping love to announce the coming dawn of unexpected peace through Jesus Christ, the one who has come and is coming again. Amen.

Well, friends, we've arrived at another season of Advent when we are told to wait again for the unexpected mystery of God incarnate, our little baby Jesus.

If your congregation follows the Revised Common Lectionary, you would have just spent a year in the Gospel of Matthew. This first week in Advent is preceded by Reign of Christ Sunday, the relatively new festival Sunday invented by the church that serves as a threshold between lectionary years. The first Sunday in Advent begins a new liturgical year and a switch to the Gospel of Mark. I start with this because we decorate our worship spaces with greenery, blue banners, wreaths, candles, angels (sadly and consistently fair-skinned and with blond hair), and other bright and shiny objects to help usher in the coming Christ. To help mark the time of Advent, the church has even invented this cute division of the four Sundays by naming them "Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love." Dare I say, the traditions of Advent and certainly Christmas have become an indulgent pageant of distractions, and the church is good at distractions.

And, of course, we want distractions; the passages we read during this season are bleak, extreme, and frequently frightening. They challenge us to talk about the second coming of Christ, something I'm deeply bothered by and entirely doubtful of. What's made worse is we are told on this first Sunday in Advent that this apocalyptic and feverish time will arrive when we least expect it, "Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come!"

So, yeah, turn up Mariah Carey, and pass me a Christmas cookie and some bourbon while you're at it! I'd rather tune out and numb myself than face the brutal and biting messages of Advent. The world is broken enough, with each generation asking, "Can it really get any worse than this?"

As a queer older millennial living in 2023, I feel like I'm in a small boat on a stormy sea-terrified, exhausted, and fragile. The winds and water lash me as I'm tossed about in a gray, horizonless, directionless world. Is help coming?

Well, I don't know, and I'm truthfully doubtful it will. Bleak, right? Well, it's honest.

Biblical hope is often based on a person, which makes it different from optimism. Optimism is about choosing to see, in any situation, how circumstances could work out for the best. But biblical hope is focused on something other than circumstances. Hopeful people in the Bible often recognize there's no evidence things will get better, but they choose hope anyway. Biblical hope isn't optimism based on the odds. It's a choice to wait for God to bring about a future that's as surprising as a crucified dude rising from the dead.

Wars, famine, earthquakes, death, disease - these things existed then, and they exist now. The question is: how do we choose to react and respond? When shit hits the fan, what will we do? Will we stay awake to it all or give in to distractions, tune out, and numb ourselves? Will we respond with violence and division, or will we remain faithful to the hope that Christ died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again?

The passages we read from Isaiah and Mark challenge us to leave our baggage at the door and believe in a universal Christ, a single person that existed then and exists now. He called us to believe that the kin-dom of God is so radically different it's almost impossible to see it through our earthly eyes.

What are we waiting for? What does the kin-dom of God look like, and how do we live into it? What's keeping us from living into that right now? Is it our politics, our church, our theology, our relationships? Challenge yourself this season to believe in something so absurd, so outlandish, so fantastical that we can bring the kin-dom of God here on earth right now and end the waiting.

HOPE

We wait for justice
but we do not wait to work for change;

We wait for restored health
but we do not wait to work to heal;

We wait for wholeness
but we do not wait to work at binding brokenness;

We wait for peace
but we do not wait to work to eliminate hatred.

Like bells ringing out the news
that the sun still shines even on cloudy days,
fill the night left by sadness with messages of hope.
Go into your lives humming the tunes that keep that
hope alive in you
and that spurs you on in your work of justice and
reconciliation.
Stop waiting.



PEACE

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

Mark 1:1-8



Many of us experience seasons in our lives that resemble the wilderness. A liminal space in the journey of life that can lead you towards hopelessness. The mountains that resemble hardships, injustice, exclusion, and death just seems to tower the sky and blot out the shining of the sun and all that radiates the source of light in our lives. The depths of those valleys can be debilitating, leaving us unable to utter the words that describe our pain, and so we cry out.

As we stand in the desolate place of uncertainty, fear, chaos, and confusion, we cry out. Physically around others, but still feeling very much alone, we cry out. Yearning to war no more, we cry out. Doing all that we could've done, being all that we could be, and praying all that we could've prayed, we cry out.

But we can be confident that those tears are a language that God understands even when we cannot. God responds with our blessed hope, Jesus. Every time you feel the wind breeze across your face this winter, let it be a reminder of the breath of God, blowing the same spirit in you that lived in Christ Jesus. The same spirit that strengthened our ancestors and all of those who have come before us to persevere through times like what we are currently experiencing.

In the waiting for the coming of our blessed hope who came to give us life abundant in love, peace, faith, and freedom, may we keep and live out the faith of our Siblings in Christ who kept marching through the wilderness of the civil rights movement bringing us closer to equity, oneness, and peace for all humanity.

May we keep the faith of our Siblings in Christ at Stonewall who kept marching through the wilderness, advancing us towards a day where we would be liberated to love and live in our authenticity and express ourselves as the unique creations God created us beloved to be.

'When we feel like we don't have what it takes to sustain the faith to hope for a positive outcome, help us to look back and meditate on the ways God has continued to be actively faithful to the promise of reconciling all of creation back to the steadfast, unfailing love of God. Although we may not be as close to the promise as we so desperately cry out to be, we know we are closer than we have ever been. We are still a result of what was once our ancestors' dream. God is still orchestrating our story, and we must hold onto to the promise that evil will not prevail.

PEACE

Eternal God,

The seasons are changing, our world is changing, and we are changing. Remind us of your faithful, steadfast love in the discomfort of change and uncertainty. A love that has remained from age to age. We thank you for your promise of comfort and your willingness to draw near to us in our weariness and brokenheartedness as we wait for justice, liberation, harmony, and peace. Help us to keep our eyes focused on our beloved hope, Jesus, and empower us with the spirit of compassion and love as we continue the work of being your agents of light for all of humanity and creation. In our beloved Jesus' Holy Name, Amen.



JOY

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28



Let us pray,

Loving God, do you hear the voices crying out from the wilderness? We, who cry out to you, are the misunderstood generation who are longing to be set free from the bonds of oppression. Help us to see your belovedness in the identities of people we meet. We are watching, and we are waiting for Jesus, who is the Word made flesh. Amen.

"Who are you?"

How many times have you been asked this question in your life?

"No, really, who are you?"

I think of the many times, as a queer person of faith, that I have been asked this question. Holding so many identities at one time, it is often hard to even begin to answer such a loaded question. The mainstream culture around us loves to create labels and put people into boxes – more often to use these identifiers as a means of oppression or exclusion than as a means of understanding.

"So you're gay?"

"But you're also a Christian?"

Then, on top of that, "You're also a pastor?"

To some people, it's like I've stepped off another planet once I begin to unpack my identity. So much to my chagrin, I resoundingly say "yes" to the person and quickly follow up by saying, "But most importantly, I am first and foremost a beloved child of God."

This is why I love the story of John the Baptist. When people first see and hear John, they are perplexed by him. The priests and the Levites ask that same question, "Who are you?" Is John, Elijah? (He's hairy and furry like Elijah was so he must be, right?) Is John the Messiah? Tell us, "Who are you?" So John, confident and true to his identity, unabashedly says, "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness." (John 1:23, NRSV)

John's voice is the cry of a generation that has long been oppressed, cast down, and marginalized by the powers of the empire. His voice is a voice of freedom, saying that one who is more powerful than him is coming, not with water, but with fire.

JOY

This one who, as the prophet Isaiah announced long ago, will "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives" (Isaiah 61:1). The voice we hear from the prophet tells us that one day, all of God's people, in all of their fabulous identities and beautifully and wonderfully created bodies, will be free from the shackles and burdens of trying to explain who we are and who we love. All because God loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing. (Isaiah 61:8).

So we, as beloved children of God, who are queerfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, will continue to cry for justice and freedom until all people are valued and seen as beloved. We will continue, as Isaiah prophesied, to rejoice in God with our whole being because it is God who has clothed us "with the garments of salvation." (Isaiah 61:10)

So my dear sibling in Christ, let us go out into the streets, adorn ourselves with robes and jewels, and use our voices to cry out into the noisy wilderness.

Blessing:

Child of God,

Go now with the freedom in knowing that God has made you,

that God has claimed you,

that God loves you for who you are, inside and outside, and that God hears your cries in the wilderness.

Amen.

An Advent Practice:

Light a candle for the Third Sunday in Advent. After you light your candle for this week, I want you to sit in the stillness and darkness of the night. Listen to God speaking to you. Pause. Breathe. Who is the voice crying out to you from the wilderness?



LOVE

Luke 1:46b-55

Luke 1:26-38



Let us pray,

God of unusual gifts, sometimes the things that you give us do not feel like gifts. It can feel impossible to bear the weight of a gift from God. Be with us in our struggle, make our bitterness and frustration light, open our eyes to the gift of your promise within, and guide us in being instruments for the scattering of the proud, the bringing down of the powerful, the lifting up of the lowly, the filling of the hungry, and the sending of the rich away empty. Amen.

It has been a particularly difficult year for queer folks all over. With the abundance of legislation poised against us and the ramping up of an election year, it can be hard to see anything hopeful ahead, and I can only imagine the way those that are just now discovering their own truths must feel. It must be a little bit of what I imagine it was like to be Mary, unfathomably pregnant as a young girl, subject to a sudden and deep vulnerability, the sort that could rob her of her life if she isn't careful, saddled with what feels an impossible truth and all of this delivered in the most unusual of ways. I find it deeply poignant that Mary's name translated in the First Indigenous Version of the New Testament is "Bitter Tears." I can imagine she would have had some bitter tears to cry; many of us do as we find ourselves and as we live as ourselves in a world that was not built with us in mind. And yet, this opportunity to wallow in bitterness is not the end of the story for Mary or for us.

Rather than dwelling solely in the dangers before her, Mary sings. It wasn't a song that had been heard before or one whose emotions are simple. No, The Magnificat is complicated. She sings a song of power and defiance in the face of fear, meeting the underlying danger and bitterness in God's gift with a rising above and a confidence that she – with the help of God – would not allow this to be something that would overcome her. This would change things, the whole world, and she, God's lowly servant, would be remembered.

I think most of us, at some point, feel the overwhelming reality that comes with being queer in this world. There are days which make us wonder if it might all be enough to bury us in the end, a curse rather than a gift.

LOVE

And, while it won't be easy, I encourage us all to remember Mary's rising to meet the moment, her promise on behalf of God that this new reality would make everything different for the better, not just for her but for all her people. We each and all hold that promise of God within us, that because of our difference, because of God's gift to us of a unique identity, because we exist in this wild and unusual world, the world might change for us, for all our people, and for all people.

And we see this gift lived out in queer community, at the bar and the board games, at Pride festivals and drag shows, and in the various threads of the internet that help people to see who they are as a gift from God to the people of the world. We are living this God-promise every day, watching it expand ever broader and deeper, offering a freedom that is seldom found otherwise.

May God bless you this week,
making you sing with strength
in the face of any negativity
you might encounter,
the Spirit flying alongside you
as you navigate what it means
to be LGBTQIA2S+
in your world, and whispering (or shouting!)
the reminder you that you have
the power to be a part of the change
in this world.



AUTHORS



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He/Him

David is working towards his Masters of Divinity at Luther Theological Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is a candidate for Word and Service through the ELCA and is currently interning with Reconciling Works. He serves as Minister of Music and Worship at Trinity Lutheran Church & Schools in Lynnwood, Washington, where he is committed to designing inclusive, dynamic, and multi-sensory worship. David lives in Seattle with his partner Brett, where they enjoy the outdoors, CrossFit, and traveling whenever possible.



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She/Her

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Is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). He was recently called to serve St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, SD, and is the mission developer and pastor for a new worshipping community forming in Sioux Falls called Shepherd's Table. He earned his Master of Divinity in 2023 from Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, MN, and his Bachelor of Arts in 2012 from Augustana University in Sioux Falls, SD. He is passionate about building longer tables and creating spaces of belonging so that all may be fed, seen, heard, and loved at Christ's table.



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Pastor of Technicolor Ministries in The Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA, and also serves as the Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Communications Coordinator on the Southwestern Texas Synod Staff. Pastor Katy is a proud member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community as a transmasculine nonbinary person and a proud descendant of the Coahuiltecan peoples of South Texas and Northern Mexico. Katy and their wife, Jessica, live in Seguin, Texas, with their dog, Molly, and cat, Blaze.

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